



## **Student Performance Q&A: 2008 AP<sup>®</sup> Music Theory Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> 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 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 students' ability to analyze aurally and notate a bass-clef melody in a major key and simple meter
- To test students' ability to distinguish common diatonic patterns and simple rhythms

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

On average, students received half the points available for question 1, the mean score being 4.50 out of 9 possible points.

#### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Adding the passing tone between F and D in measure 3
- Incorrectly notating the dotted rhythm in measure 2
- Missing the skip from E-flat to C in measure 1
- Failing to add a stem to the given notehead
- Writing as if in treble clef

***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?***

- Stress scale-degree awareness and tonal function; do not teach mechanical intervallic hearing.
- Emphasize notational clarity.
- Teach students a vocabulary of familiar rhythmic patterns for each meter.
- Give at least two practice exams, where students experience the pacing and number of hearings, etc. Notice the tempos that are typical on the actual exam.
- Emphasize to students *not* to give up when they encounter a tough example. Even partial answers can earn points, especially at the beginning and end of the tune.
- Make sure students pay attention to the given notation, including clef and given notehead.
- Engage in activities that develop tonal memory.
- Combine activities so that the concepts reinforce one another: singing as part of dictation practice, analysis with sight-singing, and so forth.

## **Question 2**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was:

- To test students' ability to notate a melody in treble clef and compound meter
- To test students' ability to deal with the variable scale degrees of the minor mode
- To test students' ability to hear and notate the altered note in measure 3

***How well did students perform on this question?***

Almost every year, this question proves to be the most difficult one on the AP Music Theory Exam. On average, students this year received only about one-third of the available points, the mean score being 3.15 out of 9 possible points.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Not notating necessary accidentals
- Missing the triad outlined in measure 1
- Notating the A-sharp as B-flat
- Writing in the wrong meter (often 6/4)
- Using triplet notation and otherwise notating the wrong number of beats per measure

**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?**

- Work on dictation every day, all year long. This does not mean the class has to write a dictation melody every day; break up the task into hearing, remembering, singing back, clapping a beat, notating rhythm only, etc. Work sometimes on small fragments of seven, five, three, or even two notes. If you play C-D-E-F-G and have students sing back “DO, RE, MI, FA, SO,” you are practicing dictation.
- Drill (writing and singing) compound meter and melodic minor.
- Have students double-check the notation of meter, making sure the proper number of beats is notated in each measure.
- Reinforce the correct placement of accidentals.
- Continue to advise students to work on the beginning and ending of the melody first.

### **Question 3**

**What was the intent of this question?**

The intent of this question was:

- To test students’ aural perception of harmony and the counterpoint of the outer voices (soprano and bass)
- To test students’ knowledge of common-practice harmony and chord progression
- To test students’ ability to hear expansions of tonic and dominant functions
- To test students’ ability to hear the imperfect authentic and deceptive cadences
- To test students’ ability to hear the cadential six-four chord
- To test students’ ability to distinguish  $V^6$  and  $V_5^6$
- To test students’ ability to distinguish IV and  $ii^6$

**How well did students perform on this question?**

This year students fared better with question 3 than they did in 2007. On average, they received just over half the available points, the mean score being 12.19 out of 24 possible points (the 2007 mean was 8.11).

**What were common student errors or omissions?**

- Mistaking  $V^6$  for  $V_5^6$  and IV for  $ii^6$
- Missing the perfect fifth leap in the bass
- Creating leaps in the totally stepwise soprano line
- Creating an upper or lower neighbor in place of one of the three repeated B-flats in the beginning of the soprano line (perhaps ascribing motion in an inner voice to the soprano)

***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 that if they notate a progression that does not make sense, it is probably wrong.
- Point out 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 (no parallel fifths, no successive dissonances, etc.); that the indicated chords contain the pitches notated; that the inversion symbol corresponds to the given bass note; and so on.
- Teach students to use various forms of shorthand in dictation in order to keep up with the flow.
- Tell students not to expect every exercise to contain a secondary dominant.
- Teach students how chords function within the diatonic context, rather than teaching each chord as a separate entity.
- Have students sing two-part counterpoint exercises and try to ascertain their implied chords.

#### **Question 4**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was:

- To test students' aural perception of harmony and the counterpoint of the outer voices (soprano and bass)
- To test students' knowledge of common-practice harmony and chord progression
- To test students' ability to hear a secondary dominant

***How well did students perform on this question?***

Despite the presence of a secondary dominant, students performed almost as well on question 4 as they did on question 3. Students earned just under half the available points on this question, the mean score being 11.16 out of 24 possible points.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Writing Roman numerals that did not match the soprano and bass
- Missing the melodic leap in measure 3
- Missing the D-sharp in the bass in measure 2, which often led to additional problems in notating the rest of the bass line
- Omitting the sharp from the leading tone
- Raising the seventh scale degree on the descending line in measure 2 of the melody
- Missing the passing six-four chord
- Indicating unlikely chord choices (especially III and uncharacteristic six-four chords)

***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 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 (no parallel fifths, no successive dissonances, etc.); that the indicated chords contain the pitches notated; that the inversion symbol corresponds to the given bass note; and so on.
- Spend plenty of time working on the minor mode, starting right away at the beginning of the year.
- Start harmonic dictation early and have students practice it often.
- Emphasize normal harmonic progression, and help students build a vocabulary of common tonal patterns.
- Constantly encourage students to use their written-theory skills when doing dictation.
- Teach students the 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  $V^6$  chord, not a root-position  $vii^0$ ).

## **Question 5**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was:

- 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

***How well did students perform on this question?***

Students performed better on this question this year than they did in 2007. On average, they received well over half of the available points, the mean score being 16.12 out of 25 possible points (the 2007 mean was 14.13).

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Forgetting the accidental required for the leading tone
- Writing the accidental on the wrong side of the note
- Putting more than an octave between the alto and tenor
- Writing uncharacteristic leaps, augmented seconds, etc.
- Writing hidden fifths and octaves

***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?***

- Stress the importance of the leading tone and the need to add an accidental for the leading tone in minor.
- 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 make sure that the leading tone always has the necessary accidental.
- Encourage students to keep the voice leading simple: normally move to the closest available chord tone, and move upper voices contrary to the bass.
- Teach students about hidden octaves and fifths.
- Make students aware that inverted chords must be complete.

## **Question 6**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was:

- 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' ability to prepare and resolve a 4-3 suspension

***How well did students perform on this question?***

As expected, students had more trouble with this question than they did with the similar question 5. On average, students received only 44 percent of the available points, the mean score being 7.92 out of 18 possible points.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Misspelling chords
- Putting chords in the wrong inversion
- Omitting the required accidental in the secondary dominant
- Adding accidentals where they were incorrect
- Handling the fourth in the six-four chord incorrectly
- Misinterpreting "4-3" as an inversion symbol
- Writing parallel fifths and octaves
- Leaving chordal sevenths and leading tones unresolved
- Putting more than an octave between alto and tenor, or between soprano and alto

- Misreading Roman numeral “vi” as “IV”
- Doubling a leading tone or chordal seventh
- Doubling anything other than the bass in the six-four chord
- Omitting or mishandling the suspension

***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?***

- Give students practice with spelling and resolving secondary dominants other than the V/V.
- Teach all figured-bass symbols: not just the inversion symbols used in harmonic analysis but indications for alterations and for suspensions as well.
- Emphasize smooth voice leading, holding common tones as often as possible.
- Stress the proper treatment of the cadential six-four chord.
- Drill the resolution of leading tones and chordal sevenths.

## **Question 7**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was:

- To test students’ ability to harmonize a melody with successful bass-line counterpoint
- To test students’ understanding of common-practice harmonic progression and 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 handle nonharmonic tones effectively

***How well did students perform on this question?***

Although this question is sometimes perceived as the hardest one on the AP Music Theory Exam, students usually earn over half of the points available for it. This year students received, on average, about 55 percent of available points, with the mean score being 4.93 out of 9 possible points.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Including inappropriate six-four chords
- Being unable to write standard cadences
- Handling the leading tone inappropriately
- Leaving chordal sevenths unresolved
- Mismatching bass notes and Roman numerals
- Including nonharmonic tones in the bass that created voice-leading errors

***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 that question 7 is an exercise in common-practice style, not free composition.
- Drill the proper (limited) uses of six-four chords.
- Drill the resolution of leading tones and chordal sevenths.
- Drill the proper writing of standard cadences.
- Teach standard progressions and common patterns; urge students to follow only the most standard patterns.
- Make students aware of the relative frequency of the various harmonies in common-practice style and encourage them to avoid the rare chords altogether (iii, I<sup>7</sup>, etc.).

## **Question S1**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was:

- To test students' ability to sing a diatonic melody in minor
- To test students' ability to sing common melodic patterns and simple rhythms, including a dotted rhythm
- To test students' ability to read treble clef
- To test students' ability to sing in simple meter

***How well did students perform on this question?***

As expected on this question, the easier of the two sight-singing melodies, students earned over half of the available points, the mean score being 5.07 out of 9 possible points.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Singing in the major mode
- Failing to initiate a steady tempo
- Missing the rhythms in segments 1, 3, and 6
- Missing the perfect fifth in segment 5 and the minor third in segment 6
- Singing the leading tone out of tune

***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.



- Help students learn how to find tonic when they get lost. Never play tonic on the piano when the class gets lost; first ask them to find it. If they are unable to do so, have them look at the first note and try to remember tonic; often the visual memory helps trigger the aural memory.
- Encourage students to practice out loud and in the same voice they will use to perform on the exam.
- Using an AP Music Theory Released Exam, let students practice taking the sight-singing portion with the recorded instructions, the correct amount of practice time, etc.
- Drill students in using the first part of the practice time to assimilate quickly the clef, meter, and mode of the melody.
- Encourage students to situate themselves vocally in the correct key and mode before beginning to perform.
- Stress the importance of taking in enough breath to sing through the entire first phrase.
- Encourage students to sing more slowly, choosing a tempo based on the use of eighth and sixteenth notes in the melody. Accuracy is valued over speed.

## Question S2

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was:

- To test students' ability to sing leaps, including some not found in the tonic triad
- To test students' ability to sing in compound meter
- To test students' ability to read bass clef
- To test students' ability to retain tonic from start to finish
- To test students' ability to recognize and perform proper phrasing involving an anacrusis
- To test students' ability to sing chromatically altered pitches

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

Students found this melody very difficult. They earned only about 39 percent of the available points, the mean score being 3.55 out of 9 possible points.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- Singing the opening four notes as an arpeggiated triad
- Missing even the easiest pitches: tonic and dominant
- Rushing the sixteenth notes
- Being unable to sing chromatic semitones
- Performing the compound meter incorrectly (often trying to "straighten it out" by forcing the melody into simple meter)
- Reading the melody as if it were in treble clef
- Singing the melody in the minor mode
- Singing the chromatic pitch as an F-flat rather than as an F-sharp

***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. Sing dictation, sing part-writing exercises, sing everything.
- Be sure to have the class sing without accompaniment.
- Train students to use the easy pitches (tonic and dominant) to get back on track. Drill the retention of tonic. Have students sometimes look at a melody and sing only the tonic and dominant pitches.
- Avoid interval-by-interval approaches; teach students to hear scales, function, and relative pitch.
- Do not delay the introduction of compound meter to your class.
- Teach students common rhythmic patterns in compound meter, as well as basic principles.
- Encourage students to practice out loud and in the same voice they will use to perform on the exam.
- Using the Released Exam, let students practice taking the sight-singing portion with the recorded instructions, the correct amount of practice time, etc.
- Drill students in using the first part of the practice time to assimilate quickly the clef, meter, and mode of the melody.
- Encourage students to situate themselves vocally in the correct key and mode before beginning to perform.