



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP[®] Music Theory Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 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 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
- Recognize diatonic pitch patterns in a major key
- Hear skips, including those within the tonic triad
- Recognize and transcribe dotted and subdivided rhythms in simple triple meter

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students received less than half of the 9 points possible for this question. The mean score was 3.49, which is lower than the mean of 4.50 for this question in 2008.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Failing to hear the tonic triad
- Failing to recognize scale degree function
- Failing to hear interval sizes
- Failing to hear dotted rhythms

Measures 5 and 6 contained the most 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?

- Stress listening to the directions (i.e., “The melody contains no rests”).
- Emphasize idiomatic triadic/melodic/rhythmic patterns.
- Teach test-taking strategies.
- Teach listening strategies.
- Have students practice effective time management during dictation exercises.
- Encourage students to proof their answers after they have finished.
- Remind students to write in the rhythm of the first note.
- Encourage students to think about phrase structure.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students’ ability to:

- Analyze aurally and notate a minor melody in treble clef and compound meter
- Handle the variable scale degrees of the minor mode, including the ascending melodic minor scale (raised sixth and seventh) and the raised fourth scale degree
- Notate correctly in compound meter (6/8) and recognize dotted rhythms and notate them correctly
- Hear leaps and the arpeggiation of an inverted triad (in this case, the iv chord)

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students received less than one-third of the 9 points possible for this question. The mean score was 2.75, which is lower than the mean of 3.15 for this question in 2008. Traditionally, this is the more difficult of the two dictation questions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Notating accidentals incorrectly
- Notating compound meter and dotted rhythms incorrectly
- Failing to transcribe the arpeggiation of the inverted triad in the second segment
- Missing the B-natural in the third segment
- Placing accidentals and dots on the wrong side of the note head

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?

- Emphasize minor mode from the beginning in order to avoid major mode bias.
- Emphasize compound meter alongside simple meter early on. Give special emphasis to the most characteristic patterns of compound meter.

- Emphasize melodic gestures that make good “common” musical sense (i.e., the raised fourth scale degree going to the dominant).
- Emphasize the distinction between notes that are flat, sharp, and natural. In this melody, for example, the B-flat was raised to become a B-natural, not a B-sharp.
- Help students to know and to recognize, both aurally and in notation, the tonal pillars of tonic dominant.
- Teach students to use the key signature and the given first note to determine the key of the exercise.
- Remind students to pay attention to the directions.
- Remind students to work in pencil only.

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)
- Knowledge of Common Practice harmony and chord progression
- Ability to hear expansions of tonic and dominant functions
- Ability to hear the imperfect authentic cadence
- Ability to distinguish between V^6 and $V^{\frac{4}{2}}$
- Ability to distinguish between IV and ii^6

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned slightly over half of the 24 points possible for this question. The mean score was 13.12, which is higher than the mean of 12.19 for this question in 2008.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Mistaking $V^{\frac{4}{2}}$ for V^6
- Transposing the bass up an octave
- Substituting a IV for the ii^6
- Missing the deceptive progression

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?

- Emphasize common chord progressions constantly, and remind students that if they notate a progression that makes no functional sense, it is probably wrong.
- Teach students to use various forms of shorthand in dictation in order to save time.
- 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 the implied chords.

- Have students review common cadences.
- Require students to work on dictation daily.
- Have students double-check that the proper number of beats is notated in each measure.
- Reinforce the correct placement of accidentals.

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)
- Knowledge of Common Practice harmony and chord progression
- Ability to recognize a secondary dominant chord
- Ability to hear both triads and seventh chords in root position and in inversion
- Ability to recognize chromatic alteration
- Recognition of harmonic gestures in the minor mode
- Ability to hear leaps in the bass (i.e., the leap to the sixth scale degree at chord 4).
- Ability to hear, transcribe, and provide Roman numerals for characteristic soprano/bass gestures
- Ability to hear and label the cadential ♯ pattern

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned just about half of the 24 points possible for this question. The mean score was 11.83, which is only slightly higher than the mean of 11.16 earned for this question in 2008.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Failing to hear the starting pitch of the soprano
- Omitting the seventh from the dominant seventh at the end
- Failing to hear and properly analyze the VI chord and its corresponding bass pitch
- Failing to hear the cadential ♯
- Providing III+ as an analysis when no such chord appeared in the progression
- Failing to hear and properly identify the vii diminished chord in first inversion

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?

- Require students to work on hearing the starting pitches of the soprano and bass lines.
- Remind students that the median chord (III or iii) is not likely to be included in the progression.
- Emphasize i, iv, and V as pivotal chords.

- Remind students that the part-writing rules used in figured bass realization still apply to harmonic dictation. For example, if parallel octaves result in the transcribed bass and soprano lines, then the transcription is incorrect.
- Remind students that the Roman numeral labels for this question will reflect the Common Practice style.
- Encourage students to hear and transcribe common gestures (like the cadential ♯) in “chunks.”
- Drill common progressions and cadences on a regular basis.
- Teach students to listen for the internal voicing of the seventh in the dominant seventh.
- Alert students to common errors.
- Teach students to connect the bass line they hear to the Roman numerals they choose.
- Teach students to memorize more of the progression with each subsequent hearing.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students’ ability to:

- Realize a given figured bass by correctly interpreting the figured bass symbols
- Correctly spell chords and analyze those chords with Roman numerals
- Write proper voice leading in four-voice harmony
- Prepare and resolve chordal sevenths
- Prepare and resolve a suspension
- Remember to raise the leading tone in the minor mode

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned slightly more than half of the 25 points possible for this question. The mean score was 12.76, which is significantly lower than the mean of 16.12 earned for this question in 2008.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Forgetting to raise the leading tone in the minor mode
- Misinterpreting the symbol for and incorrectly executing a suspension figure
- Attempting to end the exercise on the tonic harmony instead of the dominant harmony
- Forgetting to correctly prepare and resolve the chordal sevenths
- Spelling chords incorrectly
- Attempting to analyze the chords in the wrong key (often the relative major)

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?

- Emphasize raising the leading tone in the minor mode.
- Emphasize both the preparation and resolution of chordal sevenths.

- Emphasize that all nondominant seventh chords should be complete chords.
- Emphasize smooth voice leading with minimal movement in the inner voices.
- Emphasize correct chord spelling.
- Teach the proper treatment of unequal fifths—when they are appropriate and when they are not.
- Show students how to avoid overlapping and spacing errors.
- Emphasize the horizontal aspects of voice leading; have students play their realizations on the piano to help this process.
- Remind students not to alter the given material—bass pitches and figures.
- Emphasize the spelling of seventh chords.
- Explain what is meant by the term *realize the figured bass*.

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
- Knowledge of figured bass and inversion symbols and Roman numeral analysis
- Ability to prepare and resolve chordal sevenths correctly
- Ability to resolve the leading tone correctly
- Ability to correctly spell a secondary dominant chord
- Understanding of deceptive cadences

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned slightly more than half of the 18 points possible for this question. The mean score was 9.05, which is higher than the mean of 7.92 earned for this question in 2008.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Using accidentals incorrectly or unnecessarily
- Writing chords with more than an octave between adjacent upper voices
- Misinterpreting figured bass symbols by notating incorrect bass notes
- Creating poor counterpoint between the outer voices (soprano and bass)
- Choosing unnecessary or uncharacteristic leaps when smoother, more characteristic voice-leading connections were possible
- Failing to recognize or failing to understand the secondary dominant symbol
- Incorrectly spelling and resolving the secondary dominant
- Writing a IV chord instead of the specified vi for the final chord
- Writing a melodic leap of a seventh in the bass in an attempt to avoid parallel perfect fifths
- Evading the movement from the leading tone to the tonic in the soprano at the deceptive cadence
- Writing parallel fifths and octaves, especially between the V and vi 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?

- Have students sing aloud the soprano and bass lines of progressions, both separately and together, to gain an aural understanding of outer-voice counterpoint.
- Create a list of general procedures for students to follow. Rather than focusing on what not to do, emphasize what should be done at each point in the voice-leading exercise: smooth voice-leading, appropriate doubling, correct resolution of tendency tones, and so forth.
- Place more emphasis on understanding and realizing inversion symbols and figured bass. A good exercise is to have students write just the bass line from a given string of Roman numerals with inversion symbols.
- Clearly differentiate the leading tone from the seventh of the chord. Having students label them each time they appear in a chord will reinforce their different resolutions.
- Pace the curriculum so that sufficient time is provided for secondary dominant chords.
- Provide frequent practice with writing typical chord pairs (such as deceptive cadences) in short, two-chord progressions so students will recognize them in longer exercises and write them correctly.
- Have students practice writing deceptive cadences.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' ability to:

- Compose a bass line following the rules of counterpoint in the Common Practice style
- Visualize common standard harmonic progressions
- Compose standard cadences
- Identify the chromatic pitches in the soprano as a secondary dominant
- Maintain appropriate harmonic rhythm
- Treat nonharmonic tones in an effective manner
- Internally hear the music they compose (i.e., audiate)

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned a little over half of the 9 points possible for this question. The mean score was 4.82, which is only slightly lower than the mean of 4.93 earned for this question in 2008.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Using ♯ chords inappropriately and often indiscriminately
- Writing inappropriate cadences
- Mishandling the leading tone
- Failing to resolve chordal sevenths appropriately
- Including superfluous nonharmonic/embellishing tones, which often resulted in voice-leading errors

- Mismatching bass notes and Roman numerals, especially at the cadences
- Using inverted chords incorrectly, especially at the cadence
- Using weak-to-strong beat bass/chord repetition in the bass
- Using harmonic retrogression
- Using the iii chord too much

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 composition, not free composition.
- Remind students to follow the strictures and rules of Common Practice writing, including the proper use of ♯ chords; writing authentic, half, and deceptive cadences; and the proper use of seventh chords and their resolution.
- Tell students to avoid rare chords (such as the iii chord) and to avoid diatonic seventh chords other than V⁷, ii⁷, and vii^{o7}.
- Encourage students to write standard harmonic progressions, using patterns found in actual Common Practice period music as a model.
- Expand classroom work in species counterpoint, and have students write in the intervals between the outer voices.
- Give practice exercises with time limits.
- Encourage the use of primary harmony.
- Tell students to avoid eighth note ornamentations.
- Have students practice harmonization of common “chunks,” such as 3-2-1, 5-4-3, 5-6-5, and so forth.

Question S1

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students’ ability to:

- Sing a diatonic, major melody whose range is inside an octave
- Perform common melodic patterns and simple rhythms including a dotted value
- Sing in compound meter and in treble clef

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned more than half of the 9 points possible for this question. The mean score was 5.40, which is slightly higher than the mean of 5.07 earned for this question in 2008.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Transferring the dotted rhythm to segments other than where it appeared
- Failing to maintain a steady tempo
- Shortening the final note of the melody

- Substituting a dominant pitch for the leading tone in segment 2
- Singing stepwise motion in segments 2, 3, 4, and 6
- Singing triads instead of stepwise motion in segment 1

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 melodic skips throughout the year, including from scale degree 1 to scale degree 4.
- Show students how to migrate back to the tonic when they get lost.
- Encourage students to slow down the tempo to allow themselves time to negotiate leaps.
- Remind students to hold notes for their full value.
- Encourage students to continue singing without restarting.
- Encourage students to use the practice time to analyze the key signature and meter signature of the exercise.
- Encourage students to sing aloud in full voice.
- Have students do rhythm exercises separately throughout the course.
- Require students to use a system for singing pitches (e.g., solfège, numbers) and use it consistently.

Regarding exam administration, Readers who scored the sight-singing questions had the following suggestions:

- Do not administer the exam in a language lab where several students are practicing at once. This creates a poor-quality recording.
- Remind students not to record their practice time.
- Recordings on cassette tape can be simpler to make and less prone to technology-related problems. If the test proctor for the sight-singing portion of the exam is not experienced with saving electronic sound files and burning files to compact disc, using cassette tapes may be advisable.

Question S2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' ability to:

- Sing in a minor mode and to differentiate between the three forms of minor
- Sing chromatic alterations
- Sing in simple meter
- Sing leaps in the primary triads
- Sing descending melodic minor
- Sing in bass clef
- Sing dotted rhythms—specifically, the dotted quarter note
- Retain tonic and/or dominant from start to finish in a melody
- Recognize a common melodic cadential ending

- Establish a minor key with root and third
- Distinguish between leading tone and dominant

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned about half of the 9 points possible for this question. The mean score was 4.41, which is higher than the mean of 3.55 earned for this question in 2008. The higher mean for this year's second sight-singing question came as a bit of a surprise, since nearly all of the anecdotal feedback gathered at the Reading suggested that the question was significantly more challenging than it has been in years past.

What were common errors or student omissions?

- Singing inaccurate rhythms throughout
- Singing in a major mode throughout
- Missing the E-natural in segment 3
- Singing the subdominant pattern in segment 2 too high
- Missing the descending third in segment 3
- Losing tonal center throughout
- Singing two different pitches in segment 4
- Recomposing the cadence—modal seven and ii–V–I
- Failing to hold the last note for its full value
- Singing a descending dorian mode in segment 5 in an attempt to sing minor
- Switching from major to minor

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 the minor mode.
- Require students to use a system (e.g., solfège, numbers) for singing.
- Teach strategies to help students analyze melodic patterns.
- Train students to make better use of the practice time (i.e., sing minor scales and arpeggios) to achieve a solid sense of tonality.
- Have students practice rhythmic accuracy, especially holding pitches for full value.
- Teach students to conduct while singing to help them maintain a steady tempo.
- Encourage students to keep tonic and dominant in mind and to locate other anchor pitches in the melody.