



## DOCTORAL MUSIC THEORY COMMON EXAM

### Overview and study tips

The Doctoral Music Theory Common Exam is a three-hour written examination, offered once each semester, with the following components:

**1. HARMONIC COMPETENCY (20%)** – @35 minutes. Approximately 12-15 one-to-two measure examples. The skills in this section are essential concepts presented at the bachelor's degree level. Items include intervals, key signatures, chord spelling, basic partwriting, etc. **Graduate students must earn 80% or higher on this portion of the exam.**

Skills required and study tips:

Fundamental theory skills such as the notation of scales, modes, and collections; spelling, resolving, and identifying tonal harmonies in SATB texture; cadence ID; key relationships.

Practice these skills at an online theory site.

Review an undergraduate theory textbook to practice these skills (see page 3)

**2. SCORE ANALYSIS (30%)** – @40 minutes. Answer directed, pointed questions about analysis of three shorter passages (e.g., harmonic action, motivic use, compositional devices, etc.). Passages will involve one using imitative technique, one "tonal" piece, and one twentieth or twenty-first century piece. Each will require a response.

Skills required and study tips:

Terminology specific to musical forms of different eras (i.e., Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Post-tonal, Serial)

Score reading fluency (instrumentation and transpositions)

Appropriate analytical tools for music of different eras

SATB part writing

Roman numeral/figured bass realization

Phrase structure

Ability to analyze common harmonic sonorities

**3. ESSAY RESPONSE (25%)** – @50 minutes. A complete work. Answer directed questions about tonalities used and how established, tonal design, harmonies used, harmonic identification and analysis as directed, motivic use/development, rhythmic style/devices, etc. Written response required, possibly also involving musical notation responses. Your score will be determined both on the content and the quality of your writing.

Skills required and study tips:

Terminology specific to musical forms of different eras (i.e., Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Post-tonal, Serial)

Score reading fluency (instrumentation and transpositions)

Appropriate analytical tools for music of different eras  
Clearly organized and thorough discussion of the musical example  
Ability to address in depth the directed questions and not generalize  
Evidence of detailed and musically expressive writing (not bullet points)

**4. SCORE ID AND COMMENTARY (10%)** – @20 minutes. Given unidentified score excerpts, comment on these excerpts, addressing specific stylistic characteristics and probable date (within a reasonable range) of composition and composer.

Skills required and study tips:

Browse various music anthologies and scores of landmark works, noting musical characteristics specific to various genres and historical eras and representative composers.

**5. TERMINOLOGY (15%)** – @35 minutes. Briefly define or explain analytical terms and concepts.

Skills required and study tips:

Review “Terms to know” vocabulary list posted online.  
Answer clearly and thoroughly (not bullet points).

Suggested reading:

Harmony:

- Kostka, Stephan and Dorothy Payne. *Tonal Harmony: With an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music*
- Aldwell, Schachter, and Cadwallader. *Harmony and Voice Leading*

Counterpoint:

- Kennan, Kent. *Counterpoint*
- Gauldin, Robert. *A Practical Approach to Eighteenth-Century Counterpoint*.

Form and Analysis:

- Green, Douglass. *Form in Tonal Music: An Introduction to Analysis*
- Berry, Wallace. *Form in Music*

Twentieth-century techniques:

- Kostka, Stephan. *Materials and Techniques of Twentieth-Century Music*
- Straus, Joseph. *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*

Other:

- Laitz and Bartlette. *Graduate Review of Tonal Theory: A Recasting of Common-Practice Harmony, Form, and Counterpoint*

General strategies for success:

- Form a study group
- Allow yourself ample time to prepare (at least 3 months)
- Read each question carefully and answer what is asked (e.g., sonorities vs. Roman numerals, etc.)

- The content of this exam represents standard working knowledge in the areas of tonal and post-tonal theory and analysis. Be prepared to answer questions beyond simply the content of your recent graduate courses. In other words, you should also review concepts covered in a typical undergraduate core theory curriculum and remediate any weaknesses or omissions
- If necessary, work with a tutor to remedy specific weaknesses. We highly recommend you work with someone familiar with the terminology and methodologies covered in the exam (i.e., a current teaching assistant in the theory division, doctoral candidates in music theory, or other doctoral students who have successfully passed the exam)
- The exam provides time allowances for each section; bring a watch and budget your work accordingly

Good luck!