

DMA/PhD Common Music History Exam

Fall 2026

The DMA/PhD Common Music History exam is a written examination for DMA/PhD students offered once each semester, with the components listed below. DMA students will answer 2 essay questions (one from Part 1 and one from Part 2) with 3 hours to complete the exam. PhD students will answer three of the questions in Parts 1 and 2 (at least one each from Part 1 and Part 2) with 3 hours to complete the exam.

A supplement to this study guide will include specific readings (articles, books, book chapters), and repertoire selected by the musicology/ethnomusicology faculty to aid in your studying.

Exam Parts

Part 1. Broad Topic: a 1-hour essay devoted to a broad topic, such as a genre, a period, or a composer; you will select one of the two topics presented.

Part 2. Focused Essay: 1-hour essay devoted to a focused topic (see below); you will select one of the two topics presented.

Part 3. Research Tools: a 30-minute essay on a specified research tool.

Part 4. Terms (30 minutes): concise, but thorough musical-historical definitions of six terms, selected from a list of eight.

General Guidance

All of the questions will be derived from the topics listed below. The questions for the genre, broad topic, and focused topic will not be framed as a survey or historical overview. They will be asked in a manner that requires critical thinking about music and its history within the given chronology.

The broad topic (Part 1) will be drawn directly from the topics below in sections A, B, and C (trace the genre, discuss the period or period junction, etc.).

The focused essay (Part 2) will be derived from the topics in sections A, B, C, and D, and may draw from more than one of them (for example, if one of the genres is the tone poem, and the period junction were Classic/Romantic, you might be asked to discuss how the tone poem developed from the Classical to the Romantic period; if one of the genres is the motet/anthem, you might be asked to discuss how Josquin used cantus firmus in mass or motet).

The question on research tools will relate to one of the two listed in section E.

The terms to be defined will be related to the topics in sections A, B, C, and D. (See section F below.)

NB: Topics used on the exam will be removed from the list for the following two semesters and will be replaced with others.

Topics for Fall 2026

A. Genres

Instrumental

1. Wind band repertoire—specifically late 20th century American
2. Keyboard suites
 - Focus on:
 - Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre
 - François Couperin
 - J.S. Bach

Vocal

3. 17th century secular cantata (e.g., Barbara Strozzi, *Lagrime mie*)
4. Twentieth-century opera (see below)
 - Learn these ones, specifically:
 - Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes* (1945)
 - John Adams, *Nixon in China* (1987)
 - Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin* (2000)

B. Periods and Period Junctions

You should be able to clearly define the period, being able to discuss the reasons for the traditional boundaries (and any aspects you believe argue against those boundaries), the style and formal characteristics of works from that period, national character, instrumentation, cultural and literary influences, etc. For period junctions you should be able to discuss what links the two periods and what separates them. You should, in both cases, be able to cite characteristic (and exceptional) composers and specific works.

5. Late twentieth century (ca. 1950–2000)
 - Considering the repertoire and composers on this guide, focus specifically on postwar modernism, minimalism/postminimalism, and expanded timbral and textural practices.
6. Junction between Renaissance and Baroque
 - Considering the repertoire and composers on this guide, focus on *prima pratica*/*seconda pratica*, text expression, basso continuo, monody, concertato style, changing patronage structures, and the changing status of instrumental music.

C. Composers

You should be able to discuss the composer's biography and his or her works, considering issues of style (and style periods), form, genre, etc. You should be able to discuss specific works from all the periods and all the important genres of the composer's output. You should also be able to discuss the chief research tools associated with this composer (biographies, thematic catalogues, collected works, etc.)

7. Barbara Strozzi
8. John Adams
9. Vincent Persichetti
 - With particular attention to his wind band works, and place within mid- to late-twentieth-century American concert music.

D. Other Focused Topics

In preparing these topics, you should be able to consider specific composers and their works, discern key musical characteristics, describe the historical and socio-cultural context, as well as relevant aspects of representative musical examples.

10. Historically informed performance practice (HIP); issues of interpretation, ornamentation, realization of notation, instrumentation, technique, debates and controversy, etc. This one, specifically as it relates to the Baroque era repertoire on the study guide (Strozzi, de la Guerre, J.S. Bach). See supplement for specific readings.
 - See supplement for specific readings.
11. The emergence of minimalism

For Ethnomusicology-focused students only:

12. Discuss the development of thought in African music and musicology, specifically citing debates about rhythm and formal musical analysis, Pan-Africanism/essentialism, and the focus on the music versus other social, expressive (dance, ritual, etc.), cultural, or political aspects. Please be sure to reference at least three of the following authors: Kofi Agawu, John Chernoff, J.H. Kwabena Nketia, John Blacking, Paul Berliner, and Simha Arom.
 - See supplement for specific readings.

E. Research Tools

Investigate these two newly updated UK Music Research Guides, compiled by our music librarian, Maria Souliotis: [Musical Scores](#) and [Opera](#).

For this portion of the exam, you should become familiar with the structure and contents of these guides and think about how they would help you. You should be able to describe the kinds of resources each guide includes, explain how those resources are organized, and discuss how you would use them to locate scores, recordings, libretti, synopses, reference materials, archival sources, writing aids, or other research materials.

You should also be prepared to discuss several specific resources from the guides. For each example, be ready to explain what the resource is, what it helps you find or understand, and why it might be useful for a particular kind of music-historical or performance-related question.

F. Terms

The candidate will be required to write clear and concise definitions of 6 terms, which should include musical as well as historical specificity, including an explanation of the period or dates to which it applies, the repertoire with which it is concerned, and references to specific composers, schools, genres, works, practices, or conventions to illustrate the term. As stated above, these terms will be related to topics in sections A, B, C, and D (for example, polytonality and quotation are terms related to compositional practices of Ives).

Note: For some additional guidance on preparing these questions, we will be preparing a supplement which will be available by the end of July 2026.