

SO YOU WANT TO BE A MUSIC MAJOR...

Preparation of High School Students for Success as Music Majors in College

A Report of the Higher Education Division of the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely acknowledged there often exists a serious discrepancy between the level of preparation of many high school graduates wishing to pursue music as a major in college and the expectations of the college educators who audition these students for admission, or find them enrolled in their freshman music courses. Such a discrepancy can, of course, seriously diminish a student's prospects for success in a college music program. In an effort to explore this problem, and to seek a solution to it, PMEA has, over the past few years, scheduled sessions at its annual conventions aimed at precisely the kinds of skills a prospective music major should bring with him/her to the entrance audition or the first freshman class. This report represents a summary of some of the conclusions reached in these sessions and it is PMEA's hope that the information shared herein will be shared with students, private teachers in the community and to those in a position to have some influence in guiding the young prospective music major.

The following is a list of recommended experiences which will aid a student in making the transition from high school to a college music degree program. The seminar panels were unanimous in their opinion that aural skills, those described in numbers 2 and 4, below are of paramount importance for the developing young musician and cannot be overemphasized in any and all high school music activities.

1. PRIVATE LESSONS

- Advise your students who are interested in music to begin private study on their instrument or in voice AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.
- Experience in a band or choir alone will not be sufficient to prepare them for a college entrance audition. Encourage them to regularly practice music READING on their instrument. It is also advised students sing/solfege the instrumental parts. There is a good chance they will be asked to read something in their audition.

2. AURAL SKILLS

Unless a student is blessed with a natural gift these skills take the longest to develop. Don't allow the precious high school years to pass without encouraging your students to be able to:

- identify by ear the degrees of a scale that are played/sung
- identify by ear the type of triad that is played/sung (majors, minors, augmented, diminished)
- identify by ear the interval played/sung
- identify by ear the I, IV and V triads in a key when played/sung
- identify by ear the chord factor (root, third or fifth) in the bass or soprano of a chord being played/sung
- tap back rhythms played/sung (and try to notate them)
- notate simple (or familiar) tonal melodies that are played/sung

Since many high school music educators already have very full days, it is worth mentioning here that there are many computer programs and programmed texts available (often at quite modest cost) that make it possible for students to practice these skills.

3. MUSIC FUNDAMENTALS

Learning the fundamentals of music notation in freshman college theory can be a daunting task; either knowledge is assumed or is covered very quickly. Advise students to be prepared to know:

- meter signatures/simple and compound

- rhythmic values of all notes and rests
- recognize elemental form
- identify written intervals/triads
- treble and bass clefs
- major and minor scale/structure/key signatures
- key relationships within the circle of fifths

4. VOCAL ABILITY

ALL college music majors, no matter what their principal performance medium, must be able to sing, intelligently and in tune. Most entrance auditions will require prospective students to use their voices and yet many are still surprised and embarrassed when they are asked to do so, since they have had no preparation for this kind of activity in high school.

Advise your students to be able to:

- sing back pitches played within/outside their vocal range
- sing back notes in the major or minor triad
- sing the major scale with numbers, letters/solfeggio
- sing the three minor scale forms
- sing half or whole steps above or below any given pitch
- sing back tonal melodic fragments of two to seven notes
- sing simple familiar folk tunes (letters, numbers/solfeggio)
- sight sing simple folk tunes

5. KEYBOARD SKILLS

ALL college music majors, no matter what their principal performance medium, must be able to play and read intermediate keyboard literature. Encourage your students to begin piano lessons NOW. Even six months of private study during high school can make a difference; a year will be a truly significant advantage. They should work for:

- ease and fluency with intermediate level keyboard literature
- an ability to sight read one level of difficulty below performance level
- a beginning knowledge of I, IV, V harmonization of simple songs

6. THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

Music is, first and foremost, a discipline. It can be exciting, enriching, profoundly rewarding and, yes, even fun at times. But students are rarely done a service when they are advised into a college music major because they have no other serious interests except to indicate that they have "fun in band, chorus or musical." Music is not an easy major by any means; as this list begins to suggest, it requires rigorous study and a deep commitment to the art. In some ways it is even more demanding than many other disciplines; it requires its students to be both artists and scholars. It is vital for teachers and counselors to carefully assess not only the background and preparation but also the attitude of the prospective music major, in order to avert what can otherwise be a frustrating and discouraging freshman year experience. If they are passionate about and dedicated to music and aware of its rigors as well, then they belong in a college music program.

It is hoped that this information will be useful to you and your colleagues in guiding the young musician toward a successful and rewarding college music career. Should there be questions regarding any point contained on this page please feel free to send them to any one of the committee and every effort will be made to provide a prompt response.

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