Guidelines for Preparing for the UAF Music Department Graduate Diagnostic Exam in Western Music History

The exam includes the identification of standard repertoire, multiple-choice questions from each of the musical periods, musical terms, stylistic analysis (using listening excerpts and score examples), and an essay section. The written exam is divided into five parts. The exam must be completed in a two hours time frame.

Part I. Recognition of Composers—Major Repertoire.

This matching section helps determine your exposure to principal repertoire. The works in question, generally speaking, belong in the top tier of the Western musical canon.

How to prepare: Review the names and composers of major works, particularly titled compositions: symphonies, tone poems, operas, song cycles, keyboard cycles, chamber music with specific and significant titles, titled vocal works (such as masses, cantatas, and oratorios). For example, does “Trout” Quintet bring Franz Schubert to mind? Does Music of Changes evoke John Cage? Do you connect La Traviata to Verdi and Death and Transfiguration to Richard Strauss?

Part II. Multiple Choice Questions on the primary musical periods.

How to prepare: Look over old exams and Western music history data bank questions. You should know the dates of each period, as well as significant forms, styles, composers, instruments, etc.

Part III. Terminology.

You will be asked to define several terms: some relating to music before 1750, and some concerning music after 1750. You will have some choice of terms in each section. For full credit, each definition should consist of approximately three to five solid sentences that place the term chronologically, define it, and/or explain its importance. Where appropriate, please offer a composer and/or piece of repertoire that illustrates the term.

How to prepare: Study the terms from music history texts. Look for the kernel of meaning that characterizes a good definition. Then take a selection of basic terms and see how more extensive music dictionaries (e.g. The New Harvard Dictionary of Music) address these terms. Good definitions have a structure and manage succinctly to characterize a term.

Then, take a selection of terms from various eras (e.g. basso continuo, rhythmic modulation, pizzicato, parody mass, Neoclassicism) and methodically practice answering the basic questions: What is it? When was it? Used by whom? Applied how? With what importance or impact? Hint: Start each sentence with a noun—you’ll find it improves the quality of your definitions. For example: “A style created by . . . ”
Part IV. Stylistic Analysis Using Score Excerpts.

You will be shown short score excerpts of vocal and/or instrumental music from different styles and periods. You will be asked to place these excerpts historically and/or stylistically, to suggest one or more possible composers, and, most importantly, to explain the musical reasons for your answer. Your “reasons” should rest upon the basic ingredients of music: qualities you see in the harmony, melody, rhythm, texture, timbre, and, if applicable, text.

Should you recognize the piece, you must make certain you frame your answer in the requested manner. Saying “This is the opening of Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony” doesn’t provide any information as to stylistic features and chronological placement. Such an answer will not receive full credit.

How to prepare: Take excerpts from very familiar pieces and ask yourself: “What would I write to describe and date this music if I had never seen it before? What aspects of the melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, timbre, or text would stand out?” What music features are apparent in the score? Who might have been a possible composer? When might such a piece have been written?

Part V. Stylistic Analysis Using Listening Excerpts.

This section follows the same format as Section IV. Automatically recognizing the piece, per se, does not fully answer the question and will not give you full credit. You need to pinpoint musical and stylistic aspects, describe them briefly, suggest possible composers, and thereby justify your answer.

Part VI. Essay Question(s).

You will be given a choice of several questions covering broad topics. Your answer should provide not only an overview of the topic, but provide some specific musical examples illustrating your points.

How to prepare: Practice preparing answers to broad questions by developing outlines and timelines. Typical questions:

“Discuss the development of polyphonic music beginning from Gregorian chant.”
“Discuss the origins of opera.”
“Discuss the significance and development of the tone poem.”
“Discuss significant developments in chamber music in the 19th century.”
“Discuss the development of the standard four movement symphonic form.”