

What It Takes to Be a Music Major

Through the years, I have recruited hundreds of students — both music majors and students in other disciplines — to participate in performance ensembles. Some of these students enjoy their ensemble experience so much that they seek me out and announce their decision to become music majors. In these cases, my initial response can best be described as “guarded optimism”. I wonder whether this student has what it takes to be a music major.

It’s easy to identify a committed music major. This student has expressed a desire to play, teach, or be involved with music at some professional level. This individual has either contacted me directly or has received an endorsement from his or her music teacher. I hold personal recommendations in high regard because they are an indicator that the student is well prepared for challenges and will not wilt when tackling harmony, conducting, piano proficiencies, and other rigors of a collegiate music curriculum.

The other type of student raises some concern. It’s distressing to see students who have been studying another discipline suddenly declare themselves music majors and then fail their courses because they did not expect the rigorous academic curriculum or did not have sufficient preparation. It is important for students to realize that becoming a music major entails more than simply playing or singing in an ensemble.

First, students who want to become music majors must acknowledge the importance and comprehensiveness of music theory. Many students become discouraged when they’re entrenched in cumulative music theory and harmony courses that span several years. Even some fine performers have trouble with harmonic concepts, but these concepts are essential if students plan to teach or perform on a high level. A fundamental mistake students make is to underestimate basic musicianship skills, as well as knowledge of scales, triads, and intervals. These form the groundwork for the study of and success in every other harmony and form course. If students fail to acquire basic skills in the beginning, they will have trouble in later music theory courses.

Second, students must acknowledge the significance of music history to their professional lives. A common complaint among undergraduates is that music history is a long, drawn-out trivia search. However, all teachers can attest to the value of music history as a tool not only in helping to select literature but also in properly teaching performance practices. A firm grounding in music history is indispensable as one continues to assimilate information through reading and research. A student’s knowledge of music history will be called upon daily in the music profession.

Third, students must realize that applied lessons are serious groundwork for future growth. What is most distressing about some students in the applied studio is that they do not see the logic in practicing fundamentals such as scales, intervals, technique, articulation, long tones, and all the other skills that build technical proficiency. To achieve advanced musical proficiency, études and knowledge of repertoire are indispensable. Without solid and refined rudimentary skills, the student’s full potential will not be realized. The repetition of solid fundamentals is the price one must pay for true technical mastery to be reached. In a sense, one of the most important lessons a student must learn is how to practice. Many students cannot formulate a viable, tangible

study and practice plan. Without this, progress is curtailed significantly. At this juncture, a student who thinks majoring in music is just singing with a group or playing an instrument faces his or her first real test. Does this student have what it takes to become a total professional musician?

Fourth, students must develop basic keyboard skills, which are helpful in studying scores, teaching harmony, and providing basic accompaniment. As a matter of fact, a non-keyboard person can never get enough time at the keyboard. At the very minimum, students should acquire fundamental keyboard skills. To do so, all students should take applied piano instruction even if it is not required for one's particular major. Students do not realize until they are out in the professional world that they will never again have the time or motivation to improve their piano skills. Time for professional music teachers is at a premium.

Faculty members must see a student grapple with music theory, music history, applied studio study, and keyboard skills before acknowledging the student as a serious music major. These four areas can serve as checkpoints along the path to becoming comprehensive musicians (see the sidebar for recommendations for preparation at the high school level). It is important to reiterate that these checkpoints do require skills that develop over time. While the skills of some students may already be adequate, other students may require more time to practice and refine their skills.

For successful completion of a music major program, I give students the following recommendations:

- Clarify your reasons for becoming a music major. What do you want to do with your music study? Do you want to teach or be an international recitalist? Do you want to go to graduate school or professional school?
- Request the assignment of an adviser from the music faculty. This adviser can guide you through course selection and audition preparation. Ask about the proper sequence of courses and their content. If you need remedial work, it is best to discover this early on.
- Keep a portfolio of your progress throughout your undergraduate studies. Theory tests (with high marks), programs of ensemble work and student recitals, notes from master classes, and other professionally related experiences will confirm your determination to succeed.
- Manage your time carefully. You must allow time for core courses, music major courses, studio practice time, ensemble rehearsal, and ensemble performance dates. From an organizational standpoint, this is often the true test of whether you can “make it.” This is also the true training ground for becoming a teacher. Time management and organization will always be critical.
- Prepare for your proficiency tests with great care. Juries and recitals with your major instrument are the cornerstone for your musicianship. Work closely and diligently with your applied teacher. Plan appropriately for secondary instrumental requirements. This could mean lessons and performance opportunity in a less-threatening environment. Prepare for your piano proficiencies with the appropriate faculty member. While the approving faculty member may be responsible for testing, he or she may not always be the most suitable person for planning an instructional strategy to satisfy the test. You might consider asking the applied piano teacher for a referral.

- Academic habits that are predictors of success in school — punctuality, reliability, preparedness, industriousness, and effort — are also indispensable for success in the music profession. Declaring a music major is more complicated than singing or playing for pleasure. With careful planning and dedication, however, the curriculum can be one of the most rewarding in the liberal arts.

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Preparation at the High School Level

The following is a list of recommended experiences that will help students in high school music programs make the transition to college music degree programs.

1. Private Lessons. Students who want to become music majors should begin private study on their instrument or in voice as soon as possible, as experience in a band or choir alone will not be sufficient preparation for a college entrance audition. They must also be proficient in music reading.

2. Aural Skills. Unless a student is blessed with a natural gift, these skills take the longest to develop. Among other skills, students must be able to identify by ear the degrees of a scale being played or sung, the type of triad being played or sung, the interval being played or sung, and the chord factor in the bass or soprano of a chord being played. Students should also be able to tap back rhythms being played or sung and to notate simple tonal melodies being played or sung.

3. Music Fundamentals. Learning the fundamentals of music notation in freshman college theory can be daunting; knowledge is either assumed or is covered very quickly. The material students must know includes meter signatures, rhythmic values, elementary principles of form, written intervals and triads, treble and bass clefs, major and minor scales and key signatures, and key relationships.

4. Vocal Ability. All college music majors, no matter what their principal performance medium, must be able to sing intelligently and in tune. In fact, singing is required for most college entrance auditions. Students must be able to sing back pitches played within and outside their vocal range, sing back notes in a major and minor triad, and sing the major scale with numbers, letters, and solfeggio, and sight-sing simple folk tunes, among other things.

5. Keyboard Skills. All college music majors, no matter what their principal performance medium, must be able to play and read intermediate keyboard literature with ease and fluency. Students should also be able to sight-read one level of difficulty below their performance level and have a beginning knowledge of I, IV, and V harmonization of simple songs.

6. The Right Attitude. If students are passionate about and dedicated to music — as well as being aware of its rigors — then they belong in a college music program.

Note: This information is condensed and adapted from “So You Want to Be a Music Major”, by the Higher Education Division of Curriculum/Instruction of the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association, May 1997 *PMEA News*. Used by permission.