

## **Advising Undergraduate Music Majors**

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### **Abstract**

Although the study of music and music performance has been a part of higher education in the United States for over a century (the School of Music at Boston University, founded in 1872, is the oldest degree-granting music program in the United States), very little has been written on advising music majors. In fact, the author was unable to find even one article on the unique needs or advising of music majors. This short article is an attempt to begin a discussion regarding the provision of academic advising services for music students in higher education.

### **New Music Students**

Undergraduate music programs generally require that prospective students have musical backgrounds (e.g. voice, piano, and/or instrumental music lessons; participation in vocal and/or instrumental ensembles; some music history, music theory, and/or musicianship\*) as well as solid high school academic records to be granted admission into their programs. As part of the admission process, most music programs also require prospective students to complete some kind of audition. Because academic advisors are often among the first people with whom prospective and new students come into contact, advisors need to know and understand their institutions' admission requirements and processes. In addition, academic advisors need to be familiar with prospective and newly-admitted students' backgrounds and characteristics. It is upon newly-admitted students' backgrounds and individual talents that the rest of their higher education (including academic advising) will be built.

Many music programs require new students to take placement exams to determine their level of skill/knowledge in music history, music theory, and/or musicianship. Students' results on these exams determine the level at which they may register in these courses (i.e. some students are more advanced than others and enroll in more advanced coursework). In addition, the determination of new students' private instructors sometimes depends on the students' interviews and/or auditions. Finally, some music programs require their students to complete ensemble placement auditions, which determine the ensemble(s) in which students may enroll. Academic advisors must be aware of these details to adequately advise their music students.

### **General Education Requirements, Elective Coursework, and Co-Curriculum**

In addition to knowing the music curriculum, academic advisors who work with undergraduate music students need to be knowledgeable of the following so they can effectively work with their students to help them build and implement their plans: (1) their institutions' general education requirements, elective coursework, and co-curricular offerings, and (2) community music resources, organizations, and ensembles. For example, some music majors might find that courses in western European history, communication arts, religion, aesthetics, and/or art history "fit well" into their programs. Some voice majors, on the other hand, might find that courses in voice anatomy, acoustics, acting for singers, dance/movement, and/or poetry help them build their "ideal" programs. Thus, simply "fulfilling" general education requirements is not sufficient; coursework must be carefully planned with each student. Further, because some music students' needs may not be adequately met by existing curricular or co-curricular offerings, advisors may need to connect students with community resources or facilitate the creation or development of special learning opportunities for their students, such as internships or apprenticeships with area organizations or study abroad programs.

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\* Musicianship refers to skills in such areas as score reading, sight-singing, ear training, and basic keyboard.

## **Music Coursework**

Although undergraduate music majors must often complete the same broad general education requirements as other students, their major-area instruction is usually very individualized compared to that of non-music majors and usually includes a great deal of one-on-one instruction. Because of these points, and the fact that music majors are artists, music majors have very unique academic advising needs.

Institutions of higher education that are accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) must comply with NASM guidelines. Generally, undergraduate music majors are required to take or test out of foundation music coursework, which often consists of:

1. Music History
  - Often a sequence of 2-3 survey classes
  - Usually covers ancient through contemporary music history
2. Music Theory
  - Often a sequence of 4 classes taken concurrently with Musicianship
  - Usually covers music building blocks to advanced theoretical concepts
3. Musicianship (also called Ear Training and Sight-Singing)
  - Often a sequence of 4 classes taken concurrently with Music Theory
  - Usually covers score reading, sight-singing, ear training, and basic keyboard skills
4. Piano Instruction
  - To ensure keyboard proficiency upon examination

Beyond general education requirements, electives, and foundation music coursework, academic advisors assist music majors to develop individualized plans according to their areas of emphasis. Following are some examples (note that requirements may vary from one institution to another):

### *Vocal Music Performance*

- Private music lessons (Applied Music) and group music instruction/seminars
- Specialized coursework in such areas as voice pedagogy, song and operatic literature, and lyric diction
- Often required to participate in vocal music ensembles and concerts
- Often required to complete language requirements (French, German, Italian)

### *Instrumental Music Performance*

- Private music lessons (Applied Music) and group music instruction/seminars
- Specialized coursework in such areas as pedagogy and literature in students' respective instruments/instrumental areas
- Often required to participate in instrumental music ensembles and concerts
- Sometimes required to collaborate with other areas (e.g. choral ensembles, musical theatre, opera/opera)

### *Music Composition and Theory*

- Private composition instruction
- Specialized coursework in such areas as 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century counterpoint, harmony, arranging, orchestration, advanced theory, composition software applications, and desktop publishing
- Often need access to other musicians (students and/or faculty) who can perform their compositions
- Sometimes required to learn how to use electronic instruments and synthesizers
- Sometimes required to have proficiency in one or more instruments and/or voice

### *Choral and/or Instrumental Conducting*

- Private and group conducting instruction
- Specialized coursework in such areas as pedagogy and literature in their respective areas, arranging, orchestration, and advanced musicianship
- Often need access to vocal and/or instrumental ensembles that can perform the music they conduct
- Must develop superior musicianship and leadership skills, as they acquire extensive experience with performing groups
- Often need to gain acceptance into conductor-training or related apprenticeship programs

### *Music History and Literature*

- Specialized coursework in such areas as specific time periods in music history (medieval, renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary), jazz history, world music, ethnomusicology, and music literature
- Often required to fulfill advanced writing requirement(s)

### *Jazz*

- Private music lessons (Applied Music) and group music instruction/seminars
- Specialized coursework in such areas as jazz pedagogy, jazz history, jazz theory, jazz improvisation, jazz scoring and arranging, jazz composition, and analytical history of jazz
- Often required to participate in jazz ensembles and combos

### **Other Important Considerations**

Majoring in music provides students with a sense of aesthetics and a better understanding of human expression and communication. Undergraduate music majors are both scholars and artists who have unique academic advising needs that need to be considered.

In addition to attending classes, studying, writing papers, giving presentations, and completing examinations (i.e. focusing on the academic demands of being college students), music majors must also focus on developing their individual talents and honing their skills in technique, artistic interpretation, and performance, which requires many hours of individual practice and private instruction (i.e. Applied Music). Music majors also must often develop collaborative skills by being part of a larger “team” of musicians and participating in choirs, bands, orchestras, and other ensembles. In many cases, this participation is “expected” of them, and it requires additional individual practice, ensemble rehearsal, and performance time. Because of their extraordinary time and energy commitments, music majors must develop excellent organizational skills and self-motivation. It is important for academic advisors to use their knowledge of their campus’ academic programs and resources when assisting students to make decisions regarding such things as course loads and optimal combinations of courses and activities.

As implied in the preceding paragraph, one of the primary concerns of music majors is finding a balance between academic study and coursework, individual practice, and ensemble rehearsals and performance. In addition, music majors have unique experiences and emotions related to their art, including stage fright and performance anxiety; the sorrow of “not making the cut” for performances, performance groups, or other opportunities for which one has auditioned; the joy (and responsibilities) that accompanies being chosen for a performance, performance group, or other opportunity for which one has auditioned; and the exhilaration of experiencing a standing ovation after one has had an outstanding performance. Academic advisors must be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to handle these complex issues and emotions, or be able to refer their students to needed resources and services when necessary. Finally, there is the dilemma of what to do when a student’s aspirations do not coincide with his or her level of talent; support and options must be readily available.

In summary, undergraduate music students often work toward the following objectives:

- Honing their musical talent and skills
- Receiving the formal training necessary to build their talent and skills, knowledge, and the ability to understand, interpret, compose, and/or perform music effectively and proficiently
- Learning to be self-motivated (practicing, studying, participating in ensembles and projects)
- Developing professional audition, performance, and showmanship skills
- Being proactive in seeking competitions, apprenticeship programs, and workshops to gain experience and recognition

Academic advisors must understand their music students' unique needs and concerns. In addition, they must be knowledgeable of their music students' general education, major, and area of emphasis requirements, and curricular, co-curricular, and community options. Finally, music majors' academic advisors must build good relationships and collaborate with music faculty as they work with their students to build and implement their plans, and help music majors achieve their dreams and aspirations.

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