

How to Pass the Listening-List Examinations

by Roy Nitzberg

Undergraduate students at the Aaron Copland School of Music are required to complete four music-listening-and-identifying examinations as part of their non-curricular degree requirements. Over the past few years, these exams have become increasingly central to our students' music studies. Passing the Freshman Listening-List examination is required as a prerequisite to registering for both Music 273 (Harmony, Counterpoint, and Keyboard Skills III) and Music 246 (Music History I). Students must pass both the Freshman and Sophomore Listening-List examinations before registering for Music 373 (Harmony, Counterpoint, and Keyboard Skills V) and Music 346 (Music History III). At least three of the four exams must be completed before registering for the Senior Concentration. All four exams must be passed before graduation.

The listening-list exams take place in the Media Lab, Rm 225h. You can sign up for an exam by going to the ACSM homepage -- qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/music > Current Students > Listening Lists – and signing up for an exam by clicking on a date. **You can only sign up for one exam at a time.** 70% is the passing grade.

You will see that everything will become easier if you complete one listening-list exam per year. *Much easier!*

*This document provides a three-point course of action you can use to pass any of the four listening exams. Each of these points will be discussed in more detail below. First, and foremost on this how-to list: **Study for and take only one exam at a time.** Second, memorize the list on which you are currently working. Third, if you do not know for sure what you are hearing, take a good, educated guess; this document will show you how to do that.*

Always keep this in the back of your mind: it is all very well and good to get 100%, but the goal is to pass each exam with a 70%. You can take any of the four exams as often as you need.

For each listening exam, you will hear twenty short excerpts. On your answer sheet, you will write the name of the composer, the title of the composition (indicating, also, its movement number, or aria or song name) and the composition date. If you do not remember the date exactly, you can still get points for a close approximation. Getting points for close approximations, whether you are guessing at the date of composition or even the composer, will become part of your strategy for how to pass the exam. Even if you cannot remember every detail of every selection, you can still receive a few points for guessing intelligently. Since you need to pass with a 70%, a couple of extra points here and there may very well make the difference between passing and having to take the exam again. This is not an SAT: you do not lose points for guessing incorrectly. Never leave anything blank!

The Listening Lists used to be called “drop the needle” tests ... that is, when there were still such things as 33-LP records played on turntables with tone arms. You must be able to recognize the composition from any place within it: it is unlikely that the excerpt of a piece of music on a Listening-List exam will start right from the beginning. Also, do not expect, for example, that an excerpt from the Beethoven Violin Concerto will highlight the solo violin. If you look at the four lists on the School of Music website, the first thing you will notice is that there is a lot of music there to learn.

For now, make sure this link opens in a separate page so you can see the list and continue reading. Do not be discouraged! You should now click on a few of the red, highlighted links to hear the compositions. If you have been playing a musical instrument for a few years—and you probably have if you have been accepted into the Copland School—you might realize that you already know some of the music on the four lists. That does not necessarily mean that you know the name of the composer or even the title of the work, but that doesn't really matter right now. You may also notice that, for example, Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* sounds more reminiscent of a Bach Brandenburg Concerto than it does a Mahler symphony. You can use that analytical tool as well. What it means is that you have already developed an ability to recognize style periods, which are



those general categories determined by the date a piece of music was written.

Look at the Freshman list. Your first job is to memorize it. Notice that it starts with Gregorian chant, which is sacred monophonic music written for the Roman Catholic Church sometime between the fifth and late thirteenth centuries, and continues, in chronological order to a 20th-century ballet called *Billy the Kid*, a secular work by American composer Aaron Copland.



William Bonney,
a.k.a. "Billy the Kid"

The first job is to organize space. Print out the list and take a pen bracketing all the music from Gregorian Chant to the end of Medieval Polyphony with Ciconia's "O Padua sidus ..." This is all music of the Medieval period; write that label next to the bracket. The three pieces from Josquin Desprez to William Byrd correspond to music of the Renaissance on the Freshman list. Bracket that group next. The next section is bigger: bracket all the compositions from the Frescobaldi organ piece all the way to the third movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 4; all this music represents the Baroque period. Baroque means misshapen and disproportionate, but we will worry about that later. On the Freshman list, the Classical period starts with Haydn's final symphony, his Symphony no. 104 in D major and ends with the Beethoven's Symphony no. 7 in A major, op. 92.



Let's talk numbers before we return to bracketing style periods on your printed list. If you remember that Haydn lived between 1732 (do you remember that the square root of 3 is 1.732...? Does anyone?) and 1809 (do you remember that Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809? You would if you collected pennies as a child and read about the first Lincoln penny struck in 1909 to celebrate the

hundredth anniversary of his birth. (Romantic-era composer Felix Mendelssohn was also born in 1809.) If you can remember Haydn's dates, then you can take a well-educated guess when he wrote his last symphony. That was in 1795 while Haydn was in London a year after he was released from his daily duties in the Esterhazy court in 1794. The dozen symphonies Haydn wrote for his friend Salomon's orchestra are called the London symphonies. Symphony no. 104 in D major, the last of the group, is called "The London Symphony." George Washington was also born in 1732 but he died in 1799, ten years before Haydn died. (You will, of course, remember Washington's year of birth since the first Washington-head quarter was released in 1932 to celebrate his 200th birthday.) So, Haydn lived from George Washington's birthyear to Lincoln's birthyear.

A bit of web surfing will lead you to other information tidbits to help you remember certain facts that, in turn, will have you remembering others. Nonmusical reference points will be as helpful as the musical ones. The act of physically creating index cards to catalog these pieces of material—with a real pencil!—will help you to remember them.

The Romantic era on the Freshman list is not as well ordered as the previous style periods, but on the list it begins with Dvorak's Symphony no. 9 in E minor ("From the New World"), which includes the Czech composer's musical reminiscences about his trip overseas to the United States between 1893 and 1895, and ends with Carl Maria von Weber's overture to his opera, *Der Freischutz*, composed in 1821, the same decade as Beethoven's death in 1827. Bracket that group. Dvorak was particularly affected by Negro spirituals and some believe that the melodies in this symphony may illustrate this influence; more recent research on this topic indicates otherwise. On the title page of the manuscript, Dvorak wrote that he composed it in New York in 1893. While you are



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

remembering something about Dvorak in 1893, try to remember, too, that Tchaikovsky died in 1893 probably from drinking cholera-infected water.

Both Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 5 and Dvorak's Symphony no. 9 (which people used to think was *his* Symphony no. 5 before the first four were rediscovered) are in the key of E minor. Brahms' Symphony no. 4, which is on the Junior list, is also in E minor. If you're thinking about the 1890s (the "Gay 90s"), remember that Brahms died in 1897, a dozen years after he completed his fourth (and last) symphony.

On the Freshman list, music of the Modern era begins with Scriabin's Piano Sonata no. 4 (1903), although some would consider Scriabin the end of Romanticism and Charles Ives the beginning of the Modern Era. The Scriabin sonata is from 1903 and Ives' *Three Places* was begun in 1903 and finished between 1914 and 1919. W. E. B. Dubois published his radical *Souls of Black Folks* in 1903, also the year of the first World Series when the Boston Americans defeated the Pittsburgh Pirates. World War I lasted from 1914 to 1918. The second movement of the Ives involves the composer's densely orchestrated recreation of the sounds of marching bands on July 4, complete with quotes from American folk songs. Music from the end of the Modern era is represented here by Aaron Copland, after whom the School of Music is named. We will return to Copland in a minute but, in the meantime, place brackets from the beginning to the end of music from the Modern era.

First, let us chronologically compare one end of the list to the other. Click on the *Pange lingua* hymn right at the beginning of the Freshman list. The sound should evoke a picture of a small group of praying monks, possibly in a chilly, damp, almost empty space with stone walls and high ceilings. You can hear the sonic properties of the live, overly resonant space on the recording. Imagine the monks wearing traditional brown outfits, tied with worn pieces of rope. If you are not sure what all this looks like, rent the movie *The Name of the Rose*, based on the book by Umberto Eco. It is about a 14th-century murder mystery in an Italian monastery. Notice in the audio file that the monks are all singing the same melody and singing the same notes at the same time. This is a monophonic texture typical of sacred Gregorian Chant (named after Pope Gregory "The Great") of the Ars Antiqua, that subperiod of the Middle Ages that ends around the beginning of the 14th century. (The first year of the 14th century

was 1301). It is sung *a capella*, without instrumental accompaniment, in the style of music performed *in the chapel*. As it happens, this hymn's text is by philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican priest who lived in the mid-thirteenth century from about 1225 to 1274. So this is a reasonably late example of Gregorian chant.

Compared to sacred Medieval monophony, the Copland ballet could be music from another planet. Copland's best-known works were written in the 1930s and 1940s. *Billy the Kid* was written in 1938, just before the outbreak of World War II in Europe—Germany invaded Poland in 1939—and, in America, just as the Midwest was finally

recovering from almost a decade of severe droughts and dust storms called the Dust Bowls. *Billy the Kid* is hardly an example of sacred music; in fact, it is as secular as music comes, a story about a notorious outlaw who is eventually killed by lawman-gunner Pat Garrett. Over the years, Copland's music has become associated with the mythology of the American West, with pioneers traveling across the plains, Conestoga wagons, cow-punching cowboys, rodeos and celebratory barnyard dances. In fact, two other famous ballets by Copland, *Rodeo* (1942) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), helped him to achieve his status as the chief architect of "real" American music.

Of course, legend often strays from reality. Aaron Copland was born into a Lithuanian Jewish family in 1900 living in Brooklyn above a shop on the corner of Dean Street and Washington Avenue. In the 1920s, he studied composition in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and traveled around Europe before returning to America. And so, imbued with that uniquely French flavor of mid-20th-century European musical convention, this small stature, young Jewish man became the "dean of American composers," creating a compositional style associated with ten-gallon hats, six shooters, chaps,



Aaron Copland helps to edit film

tumbleweeds and other icons of the opening of the American West. "Draw, pardner!" We call this "incongruous," that is, a connection that seems to contradict one's expectations of sense and logic. It would be like an *almost-always-elegant* Janet Jackson doing a patent leather commercial forever linking her name to Payless Shoes.

All these stories, number associations and historical "aromas" are meant to help one memorize the list and to make it easier to become more familiar with important musical dates and style periods. Of course, what is here for the Freshman exam can easily be applied to the other three lists as well.

Another compositional category, *genre*, will also help you learn the list. If you look at the bracket you placed around the Classical-period compositions—the Classical era covers the early 18th to early 19th centuries—notice that works by the three composers cover three genres: symphonies, concertos and sonatas. In this case, since both the concertos and sonatas involve only the piano as a solo instrument, your task becomes a little bit more difficult. However, we should take as a given that listening to the music on each list, over and over, is part of the learning process.

To help memorize the names of compositions, you might try opening a blank text file and rearranging the list. For example, if you make a "Concertos" category, you could place, chronologically, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* ("Winter"); Bach's Concerto for Two Violins in D minor; Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 4 in G; Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor, K. 491; and Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor. You might make a "Symphonies" category, an "Operas" category, and so on. Within each category (that is, within each genre), arrange the compositions first by style period and then by date. Or arrange each style period first by composer and then by date. It depends on what you want to do; or you can flip a coin. Anything you assemble this way, simply by sitting down and manipulating the parts of the list, will help you learn it. Again, the use of a blank sheet of paper and pen or pencil will help reinforce the material.

Part of the strategy to pass the exam involves making reasonable guesses. Say that you are trying to identify a movement of a symphonic composition. Since you have been listening to all the compositions, you realize, mostly because of the orchestra size, rhythm and lack of overt, gratuitous emotionalism, that the excerpt must be from the Classical period. It is probably not Baroque since there is no harpsichord tinkling in the background. (But be careful with this: more and more modern day performances of early- and even mid-Classical symphonic repertory often—and correctly—use a

continuo harpsichord). It is also dance-like and in triple meter. In fact, it sounds like a minuet.

The first thing to do is to discard concerto as a possible orchestral genre since mature Classical-era concertos have no minuets. Beethoven's symphonies often have scherzos as third movements (just like his Symphony no. 7), so you should be thinking Mozart or Haydn. You have already decided that the orchestra is not large enough—or noisy enough!—for it to be a Romantic-era symphony: not Dvorak, not Tchaikovsky. The Schubert "Unfinished" Symphony, stylistically very close to late Classicism, has no third movement (Schubert left a piano score for a third movement but didn't orchestrate most of it, so when one hears the symphony recorded or in a concert, only the first two movements are played). Since you have already memorized the list, the possibilities include Haydn's Symphony no. 104, or the 40th or 41st Mozart symphonies. If you also remember that minuet movements tend to be in the tonic key of the symphony and you already recognize that the movement is in the minor mode, it can only be one of your three choices, Mozart's Symphony no. 40 in G minor, third movement.

(The vast majority of minuet movements in symphonies is the third of four movements. However, some earlier four-movement symphonies and string quartets by Haydn, for example, have a second-movement minuet and the slow movement is the third, where the third creates a stark contrast to the fast final movement—not just a contrast of tempo, but also of key, since symphonic slow movements are never in the tonic key of the symphony. In the early- to mid-Classical period, slow movements were often in the subdominant, and this also applies to sonatas and concertos. Anton Bruckner often liked to use that same tempo relationship of inner movements in his late-19th-century symphonies. (However, Bruckner's Symphony no. 4—on the Senior list—follows the more conventional movement



*Silhouette of Richard Wagner offering snuff to Anton Bruckner.
Bruckner is apparently quite appreciative*

layout with a slow second movement.)

When was the Mozart symphony written? Mozart died in 1791 and Symphony no. 40 is his penultimate (that is, next to the last) symphony he wrote so you can guess that he probably wrote it not too many years before he died. If you came up with 1788, you will get full credit for the date. In fact, if you guessed 1790, you would get a point as well for being ridiculously close. Even if you incorrectly guess Symphony no. 41 (which has a third movement in C major), you will still get credit for Mozart and the year of composition—and remember that a few extra points here and there can push you over the 70% dividing line. I hear rumors that life is easier if you happen to have perfect pitch.

But how do you remember 1791 (keeping in mind that knowing a composer's birth and death years will make it easier to recall a composition date)? Actually, this is simple. If you turn 1791 into letters, "1791" becomes "agia" (the first letter of the alphabet, a = 1, g = 7, etc.) and "agia" is an *acronym* for "A ghost is afoot" (an acronym is a word or name constructed from the first letters of a longer title: NATO is an acronym for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). What does "a ghost is afoot" have to do with Mozart?



Tom Hulce as Mozart in Amadeus (1984), directed by Milos Forman.

If you have seen the wonderful movie *Amadeus*, a fictionalized account of Mozart's years in Vienna just before his death—in 1791!—you might remember the scene where Antonio Salieri appears at the door wearing a disguise, the same outfit that Leopold Mozart (Wolfgang's father) had worn to a costume party earlier in the movie. At this point, Leopold has already died. Mozart is writing the opera *The Magic Flute* using his pool table as a desk and pushing around a yellow billiard ball as he writes. There is a knock at the door and, when Mozart answers it, he sees what appears to be the ghost of his father requesting him to write a Requiem Mass, a Mass for the dead.

Mozart is scared and horrified but, because he needs the money, accepts the commission from someone whose identity is hidden and who has gone out of his way to appear as his dead father raised from the grave. And now we speculate a bit about how the scene could have continued. After this incident, Mozart must return, sweaty and nervous, maybe shaking a little, to his pool table and to his opera while he thinks to himself, “A ghost is afoot.” That is, “1791,” which is when this make-believe incident was supposed to have happened. Memory experts say that the sillier and more ludicrous the story is that you are inventing to remember something (such as 1791 = agia), the more easily you will remember it. (By the way, Mozart did not speak English, at least not too well, as we can infer from his lessons with a student named Thomas Attwood, but we are not going for authenticity sometimes!)

Another way to estimate the date of a Mozart's work is by the “K.” number, based on the catalog of Ludwig von Koechel. Take any Koechel number over 100, divide it by 25 and add ten. That will give you an estimate of Mozart's age when he wrote it. For example, K. 550, the number of Mozart's Symphony no. 40 in G minor, gives us 1788 if we put it into the formula above: $(550 / 25) + 10 = 32$. Add 32 to 1756 (the year of Mozart's birth) and you get 1788. The numbers won't always come out so neatly, but you can usually get very close. Here is another way to remember music: add words to melodies that have none. Many students find it helpful to memorize the opening themes to symphonies, concertos, opera overtures and the like, but the melodies will be easier to learn by adding words, very much in the same way that Medieval monks and nuns added text to strings of notes to learn them faster. (Using more sophisticated language, they are “troped melismas.”) Here are a couple of the more famous ones with more modern music than Gregorian chants. Sing the G-major theme of the second harmonic area of the first movement of Schubert's “Unfinished” Symphony. Now add the words “This is the

symphony that Schubert wrote but never finished." If you want to make it funnier, and therefore easier to remember, use the words "This is the symphony that Schubert didn't finish ..." which lets the melody trail off without any more words. That is, the melody is unfinished.

Or try this. The opening of the Introduction to Part I of *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Igor Stravinsky, the ballet that scandalized Paris in 1913, is a Russian folksong in A minor. Sing it. Do you remember which instrument is playing the melody? Add the words "I'm not an English horn. I'm not an English horn; this note's too HIGH for me. I'm not an English horn." The note on the word HIGH is the highest pitch note in the opening phrase, making the melody just a bit easier to remember. The instrument, by the way, is a bassoon playing up in a register where no bassoon had ever gone before. (And it probably sounded quite gruesome during those early performances ... maybe what Stravinsky was going for.)



The Housatonic River passes through the Glendale Hydroelectric Station in Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Sometimes a composer will make the word-music association for us.

Charles Ives' "The Housatonic at Stockbridge," the third movement of his *Three Places in New England*, actually exists in two forms. The first, which Ives completed around 1914, is the orchestral version you have on the Freshman list. The title refers to the Housatonic River passing through an idyllic scene in the western Massachusetts town of Stockbridge, at the southern edge of the Berkshire Mountains. (If you ever take a trip to the Tanglewood Music Festival in Lenox, Massachusetts, and take Route 7 a little southeast, you'll see what Ives and his recently married wife saw a century ago—it's still there and still beautiful.) The piece opens with a misty, impressionistic, atonal haze, reminiscent of a steamy, foggy blanket hovering just over the river's surface in the very early morning. A wordless melody then begins in the lower strings. The musical scene has almost a religious aura about it; the melody sounds like a church hymn. If you listen to it closely, you will notice also that the melody is vaguely like the opening of the "fate banging at the door" motive of Beethoven's Symphony no. 5, but the mood is, obviously, totally different.

In 1921, Ives reduced this orchestral movement for the smaller forces of a *Lied* (art song), for voice and piano. (A few years after that, the composer included it in his 114 Songs, a collection that he himself bankrolled with funds he made from selling insurance.) Here, the misty morning music is taken by the piano. When the melody enters, the text is a poem by Robert Underwood Johnson. This is the opening stanza:

*Contented river! In thy dreamy realm
The cloudy willow and the plumpy elm:
Thou beautiful! from ev'ry dreamy hill
What eye but wanders with thee at thy will.*

The poem is also included in the orchestral score. Ives was probably already thinking about the lower-strings intoning Johnson's poetry when he wrote the orchestral version, so the leap from orchestral composition to art song is probably not as surprising as it first seems. When you hear the strings melody, think *Contented river!* and you will probably never misidentify the music.

There is a similar relationship between text and music comparing the art song *Die Forelle*, "The Trout" by Franz Schubert, to the version of the same music that he used, without voice, of course, in his Piano Quintet in A major. The *Lied* version is on the Sophomore list.



"We hold these trout to be self-evident ..."

You may find it easier to remember what a piece of music sounds like if you can use some other senses along with your ears. Listening several times to Part I of Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt* will obviously be useful. However, if you borrow an orchestral score from the library, so that you are hearing and seeing at the same time, you will have a much better chance of remembering the experience. English is not easy to understand no matter how excellent a performer's diction is, so do not be shy about listening to an English-language oratorio or opera with a libretto. Having a score in front of you will make it easier to learn and remember the music. Same thing with a violin concerto. Listen to a performance several times of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, but after you have begun to remember what the music sounds like, take a score from the library and reinforce your listening by following the printed music.



Hildegard Behrens as Brünnhilde



Mimi dies ... again ...

watching the production on a DVD, unless of course Puccini's *La bohème* is being done at the Metropolitan Opera ... and it usually is. Whether you are at Lincoln Center or sitting at home, make sure the titles are turned on and that you understand everything sung. At the Metropolitan Opera house, the titles, which are on the back of the seat in front of you, can be turned on if they are off, and you can choose any number of languages for you to follow the libretto.

Don't try to be a "purist" by forcing yourself to evaluate the music without the words. The two—not to mention the staging, the costumes, the lighting and that guy selling small bags of roasted peanuts—were meant to provide a total artistic experience. Okay, I'm not serious about the guy with the peanuts. But at the Met, there really is an area where you can buy incredibly overpriced desserts and after-dinner liquors during intermissions as you gaze dumbfoundedly at the two, huge Chagall murals. And, if you have already paid a fortune for opera tickets, you might as well break the bank.

The second prong of the two-prong opera approach involves the same line of attack used for everything else. Listen to a recording while following the music from a score. If you can find a score that includes both the original language and a translation (sometimes the translation appears in italics under the original), that will even be better. If you are just teaching yourself to score read, it is sometimes easier to follow an opera with a full orchestral score rather than a piano-vocal score since you can more easily tell where you are in the music based on coloristic cues and instrumentation. Also, noticing the language of a musical excerpt may help you eliminate unlikely possibilities: Verdi only wrote operas in Italian; Wagner only wrote operas in German.

Watch out for *recitativo accompagnato* and *recitativo secco* and remember that later Romantic-era operas, such as those by Wagner and Puccini, have no recitative specifically, but will vary between overt aria-like sections with strong rhythmic underpinnings and those portions where the rhythm is freer and more diffuse and the interaction between the characters is quicker. Recognizing these stylistic distinctions will help you determine what you are hearing.

To recap, if you will pardon the sonata-form reference, work on only one list at a time, memorize the list you are presently doing and make

intelligent and cunning guesses. I think that if you follow the procedure outlined here, it will be reasonably simple to pass any of the four listening exams. Good luck!

August 2009, updated Sept 2019

All the photographs in this document were taken from internet websites, as listed below.

Victrola phonograph: <http://www.victor-victrola.com/Design2.jpg>

Billy the Kid:
http://www.tagate.com/western/billy_the_kid/billy_the_kid.jpg

Big Ben in London:
http://th02.deviantart.net/fs44/300W/i/2009/070/e/d/Big_Ben_by_Creative_Theory.jpg

Tchaikovsky: <http://www.conservapedia.com/Tchaikovsky>

Aaron Copland:
http://www.laphil.com/media/people/copland_aaron_175x175.jpg

Wagner's Snuff:
<http://www.musicwiththease.com/bruckner-03.jpg>

Amadeus:
<https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fc8.alamy.com%2Fcomp%2FPMBEJP%2Ftom-hulce-amadeus-1984-orion-pictures-all-rights-reserved-file-reference-33371-754tha-for-editorial-use-only-PMBEJP.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2Fwww.alamy.com%2Ftom-hulce-amadeus-1984-orion-pictures-all-rights-reserved-file-reference-33371-754tha-for-editorial-use-only-image219070510.html&docid=e3KABF9XG5iuM&tbnid=4Kv25s7cYbG4IM%3A&vet=10ahUKEwiMs7HL9cbkAhVkleAKHa4tD7EQMwiYASgnMCc..i&w=1300&h=941&client=firefox-b-1-d&bih=937&b>

Stravinsky and Nijinsky:
http://www.geocities.com/guiaudicion/galeria/stravinsky_nijinsky.htm

The Housatonic River:
<http://www.housatonic-river.com/atlas/glendale.php>

Trout:
http://flafin.blogspot.com/2009_03_01_archive.html

Hildegard Behrens:
<http://parterre.com/2009/08/18/hildegard-behrens/>

Mimi dies:
<http://www.mvdaily.com/articles/2006/11/la-boheme6.jpg>