

Ph.D. in Music, Composition Track Field Exam FAQs

What is the field exam? How is it structured?

- The Composition Field Exam is a 2-hour oral examination that must be taken before PhD composition students advance to candidacy.
- The Exam will be based on a list of 100 pieces. The list of pieces, and a recommended bibliography, are given in Appendix B of the MA-PhD Composition handbook.
- If you do not pass the exam, you will not be allowed to advance to candidacy, and must retake the exam in the following semester.
- The examination committee will consist of three members of the composition faculty, to be chosen by the Graduate Program Director in consultation with the members of your directing committee.
- Your examination will take the form of a broad-ranging conversation with the committee about this music, its significance, and its relevance to your own work as a composer.

What is the purpose of the field exam?

- The purpose of this examination is to ensure that candidates for the PhD in music composition are well acquainted with a wide range of compositions and compositional styles from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
- The faculty believes that any student obtaining a Ph.D. in composition should be well familiar with important trends, styles, and attitudes in the compositional landscape of the 20th- and 21st-centuries and have a scholarly understanding of the history of music since 1900.

What is the rationale for the list of works on the exam?

- The list is primarily devoted to concert music in the Western Art Music tradition, but a few key works in the area of jazz and popular music are also included.
- The faculty regards the works on the list as important for a variety of reasons. A work might usher in a new style or may be a significant or outstanding work exemplifying a particular style. Or it might be an important representative example of some genre, such as show music, religious music, electronic or computer music, etc. Or it might be a work of historical (even if passing) significance, or a work of exceptionally high quality.
- You may add up to five additional works of your own choosing to the music on the list. You need to make sure that scores and/or recordings of these works are readily available to the examining committee. Your list of additional works must be ready, and the list sent to your advisor in the semester prior to the one in which you take the exam.

How should I prepare for the exam?

- You are asked to familiarize yourself with all of the music on this list, consulting both recordings and scores. (Recordings can be heard in the Music Library).
- Obviously, not every work on this list will be covered in the examination, but you must be prepared to speak knowledgeably about any work on the list.
- This is not a “drop the needle” test; you will not be asked to identify works from recordings or scores.

- You are not expected to do an exhaustive analysis of each piece, but you need to be knowledgeable about the technical underpinnings of the music, important aspects of the composer's style, as well as its larger historical and social context.
- One question you might ask yourself as you prepare for the exam is "why did the faculty choose this particular piece?" The answers to that question may help guide you in your examination of the work.

What kinds of questions should I be prepared to answer?

Here are some general categories and some sample questions. Answers to any question should be connected to specific composers and works.

- Historical Contexts
 - What was the impact of World War II on contemporary music in Europe and America?
 - How did recording technology affect musical developments?
- Compositional Schools, "isms", trends
 - Mahler said, "tradition is slovenliness" (Tradition ist Schlamperei). Talk about tradition in the 20th and 21st centuries.
 - Is there a mainstream?
 - Do you think any of these composers or pieces represent streams that are dead ends?
 - What aesthetic styles emerged that emanate from a "reaction to" as opposed to "in the tradition of"?
 - Which of these composers would you consider to be mavericks and why?
- Compositional Techniques
 - 20th-Century Tonality
 - How is Stravinsky's use of tonality different from, say, Hindemith's?
 - Schoenberg said, "There is still plenty of good music to be written in C major." What's your opinion?
 - Serialism
 - What early 20th-century works can be seen as precursors to, or anticipations of, serialism?
 - How does Schoenberg's 12-tone music relate to the serial music of post-World War II composers? Why did Boulez write an article called "Schoenberg is Dead"?
 - Although many composers continue to utilize serial techniques, serialism does not seem to be as highly prized today as it was in the mid-20th century. Why do you think this is so?
 - Notation
 - Some of the music on this list has no musical score at all; other works have scores in which many details are meticulously specified. Discuss the shifting roles of notation in the 20th century. Discuss some pieces in the light of what their scores (if any) specify, what they do not specify, and how they work.

- Which composers leave the most room for interpretation by the performer ?
 - How has notation affected composition in the 20th/21st century?
- Organization of timbre
 - How has the role of timbre evolved over the 20th century?
 - Discuss the rise of "extended techniques" and how they function musically.
 - How did "spectralism" evolve?
 - How is electronic technology related to the organization of timbre?
- Relations between composer/audience/performer
 - Contemporary composers have exhibited a wide range of attitudes toward their listeners. Choose some examples and talk about this.
 - Discuss what is meant by the "new virtuosity" and the "new complexity"?
 - In the 20th century, the distinction between "Highbrow" and "Lowbrow" has become unstable. Discuss the shifting interface between "popular" and "serious" music.
- Personal reactions
 - Why did you pick the pieces you chose?
 - Which of the pieces in the field exam are closest to your own aesthetic and why?
 - Which of these pieces did you hate and why?
 - Has any of these pieces affected the way you think about music?