

PREPARING FOR COLLEGE MUSICIANSHIP STUDIES

Congratulations on your acceptance into the Music Division of the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University! We in the Department of Music Theory and Composition look forward to working with you over the next four years in our music theory and musicianship courses. While all of your past musical experiences and activities have prepared you for embarking upon a rigorous college-level program for music majors, there are a few things that you can do to help smooth the transition to your college music studies. What follows is a brief outline and description of these things. It is possible you are already working on some of these. If not, a few weeks of preparation before you begin music theory studies will get you ready for the next stage of your musical training.

1. Get comfortable with your singing voice.

All musicians, whatever their specialties, are expected to be able to make music with their voices. We are not talking about traditional vocal training that leads to recital-quality singing. What we mean by being “comfortable with your singing voice” is the ability to sing pitches and rhythms accurately and in a relaxed manner. Singing is an important component of your required four-semester musicianship courses, so if you haven’t done much singing in the past, now is the time to start.

Singing melodies of any kind and style is a good place to begin. In addition, it’s a good idea to practice pitch matching in a wide variety of registers. For example, practice playing a pitch on your instrument or the keyboard and immediately singing it. Choose pitches not only in your own voice register, but in higher or lower registers. In singing these pitches, you will of course need to move them up or down one or perhaps several octaves to bring them into your

voice range. The ability to do this quickly and easily reflects the fact that you are truly “hearing” these pitches.

Be able to sing in tune the basic major and minor scales in one octave. Since much of your beginning musicianship studies is based on scales, being able to sing them accurately is an important skill.

Some of you, especially singers, may already have a background in solfege, that is, the application of syllables or numbers to notes within a key. This is a great preparation for college music studies; however, our courses do not necessarily assume this background. If you have not studied solfege before, the recommendations above will still help you achieve a level of vocal competence that will help you do well in your courses.

2. Review the fundamentals of music theory.

By “fundamentals,” we mean scales, key signatures, intervals, triads, rhythm, and meter. You may have studied many or all of these things with private teachers or in school courses. Now is a good time to review these materials in preparation for the placement tests you will take before the start of the fall semester. These tests, based on theory fundamentals, will place you in a section of our courses suitable to your background and ability.

At this point in your studies, scales and key signatures are perhaps the most crucial of fundamentals. There are several things you can do in these areas during the weeks before the start of courses. Memorizing all the major and minor key signatures is a good place to start. Since all musicians learn to play scales on their primary instrument, it’s also a good idea to use this ability to help you deepen your knowledge of scales. As you play scales on your instrument, visualize the placement of the notes on the staff and think of their names. This helps to connect the *how* of playing your instrument with the awareness of *what* you are actually playing.

3. *If you haven't studied the piano or organ before, at least begin getting familiar with the keyboard.*

Part of your musicianship training will be developing basic technique on the keyboard, which you can then use as a tool in the further development of your skills. All entering students will have the option to be tested by the Class Piano department to determine advanced placement in the class piano sequence. (Information on the piano placement requirements is attached.) If your primary instrument is not the piano or organ, and you've never had any keyboard training before, there are still some things you can do to prepare for your college music courses.

Know the names of the notes on the keyboard and their notation in the bass and treble clefs. You can easily practice this by taking any piece of music and quickly finding individual notes on the keyboard. When you practice matching pitches vocally at the keyboard, think of the note names before singing them. Playing scales is another way to become familiar with the keyboard. Slowly playing a major or minor scale (precise fingerings are not important at this stage) while reciting the note names will not only give you keyboard practice but will also go a long way toward training your ear and reinforcing your knowledge of music fundamentals. Depending on your prior training, you can also practice playing intervals and basic triads (major, minor, diminished, augmented) with one hand.

Any or all of the things mentioned above, with a very small investment of time, will help you lay the foundation for success in your theory and musicianship courses and in the future development of your musical skills.

- The Theory/Musicianship Faculty