

## Mills College Music Department

### Report on student assessment procedures, October 2008

#### I – *Undergraduates*

The progress of our undergraduate majors is based on the following five learning goals:

1. To understand music within a broad cultural, political, social, and intellectual context.
2. To possess knowledge of and openness to a diversity of musical styles and practices.
3. To be able to notate and read music proficiently. To achieve excellent musicianship skills (through sight singing and ear training)
4. To have a good grasp of Western music theory and history, demonstrated by analyses of scores and research papers on music history.
5. *For performers:* to learn or develop improvisation skills in addition to studying the standard repertory.

*For composers:* to learn and develop technical skills in electronic music, computer music, and recording engineering, and to demonstrate an understanding of how to use these skills for creative ends.

Each of these learning goals is assessed continuously using the template attached, which allows us to group the students according to three basic levels of understanding: from beginner through intermediate to highly developed. The overall major, as well as each of the four areas of specialization within it, are structured in such a way as to allow a logical progression through each step of each stated goal.

The effectiveness of the curriculum is continuously re-evaluated, and may be updated or modified according to feedback from instructors in regular department meetings, in order that we can continue to stay focused on what we are trying to achieve. For example, we have just added a course in chromatic harmony that is designed to complement the two already existing courses on diatonic harmony. This will allow students more time in *each* of the three courses to do their own written music exercises, which have proven to be the most effective way to learn the nuts

and bolts of composition. It will also broaden students' exposure to the full range of historical compositional practices, thus touching on all five of our learning goals.

A particular challenge in any Fine Arts course is to make sure the students are studying at the requisite level. Since a student may have manifested extraordinary musical talent from an early age, she may be very advanced in, say, instrumental and even ensemble skills, while not necessarily having a commensurate degree of theoretical knowledge; or she may have an unusual grasp of a particular skill set while being unaware of others that may be equally important in her development. Having a closely-knit department in which graduates and undergraduates are part of a small and intertwined working community is hugely beneficial in this kind of situation, and is one of the reasons why an unusually high number of our courses are open to both graduate and undergraduate students. This ensures that while undergraduates may go back and study basic theory in case of need, they may also go forward and take more advanced courses, preventing the likelihood of feeling stuck in a stream where they might feel they didn't belong. Composition majors may study one-on-one in a Composition Practicum with composition faculty in the same way that graduate composers do, for example, as long as they demonstrate that they are ready to benefit from such an option.

Our many ensembles, the heart of any music program, are similarly structured to allow for different degrees of skill and experience, and these are also constantly under review. The improvisation ensemble, for example (MUS 026/126/226), which was open to all-comers after an audition process, is simply too big at this point to be able to work on more refined skills. We have therefore separated it into two different ensembles, and the version that meets in the Spring is smaller and concentrates on those students who are more highly developed and have a more sophisticated understanding of the material. Our size as a department enables us to make these outwardly minor but highly effective—and necessary—curricular changes as the need becomes apparent. Both ensemble participation and individual instruction are evaluated using two distinct forms in which the students' progress is measured according to eight separate categories. These can help the student to address specific areas that need improvement, and are also useful in providing us with an overview of how effectively we are teaching. Samples are attached.

We measure the development of undergraduate students using both standard tools—mid-term and final exams, written essays and term papers—and outcomes specific to our program, such as musical compositions, sound installations, self-built instruments, instrumental and vocal performances, recordings, and so on. In the classroom, students are expected to be able to discuss ideas, both practical and theoretical, and to develop analytical and critical skills across a broad range of

musical and historical practice. These form an important component of our grading considerations, not only in historical seminars (MUS 137, MUS 101/102, or MUS 118) but also in every category of activity, including workshops and ensembles. Participation in either final recitals or the festival for Composition (and sometimes Intermedia) Majors—currently known as *X Sound*—allows the students to apply the skills that they have acquired or developed at Mills to a carefully planned and executed performance that serves as a model for the kind of concert or installation they can expect to be involved in as their careers unfold. A final presentation of this kind will be judged on a number of factors, including but not limited to the following:

- Was the conception of the piece well-considered and original?
- Was its realization adequately organized in terms of advance planning, preparation of score where relevant, effectiveness and success of rehearsal process, quality of sound treatment, editing and mixing (in the case of electronic submissions), and so on?
- Did the student demonstrate the capacity to explain her process clearly to the other participants and to work efficiently with them in the realization of her ideas?
- Was the student able to communicate effectively with the audience (via program notes, for example) about what she was trying to do?
- Was the presentation artistically successful?
- Whether successful or not, was the student able to engage critically with the material she created and the process of its realization, in order to learn and grow from the experience?

Of course our goal is that the student will be able to use the above criteria whenever she is presenting work, not only for the final concert; everything we do (in more or less every course we teach) is geared towards encouraging this degree of self-awareness and critical engagement. The rubric we are proposing to use for the evaluation of senior recital concerts and presentations is attached.

Attached is a list ("Courses and Learning Goals") showing how each course in the undergraduate program relates to each learning goal. From this it can be seen that we continue to introduce new materials throughout the duration of the program, allowing for students to develop the ability to grapple with increasingly complex and challenging ideas and material as they move through the process. The grid also demonstrates how the different learning goals are introduced, develop, and overlap across a wide spectrum of courses, so that learning carries over from course to course regardless of the different areas of specialization.

What the grid does NOT show is one of the principle advantages of a small program in which all of the instructors are both active and successful either as practicing artists or scholars: accessibility. The immeasurable and largely

unacknowledged academic advantage of accessibility in this context is that students can readily address creative and academic problems without having to go through elaborate bureaucratic procedures. The professors are simply available, which means they get to know students and their work in a detailed and sympathetic way, and are constantly there to give feedback, advice, encouragement, and rigorous criticism. From the assessment point of view, the impact of such interaction is enormously valuable. There's little risk of an oversight or of any misjudgment of a student's qualities when we know each other this well; and knowing that they cannot really "disappear" encourages the students to attain a high level of responsibility and self-motivation.

This may seem to be tangential to an assessment of learning goals and their realization, but in fact it means simply that we are unlikely ever to rely on a list or a grid as the *SOLE* measurement of "outcomes", helpful though such tools may be in providing us with a focused approach to the learning and grading process. There are less tangible areas that are critically important, especially when considering that music is virtually always a collaborative process, and that interaction—with other musicians, conductors, sound engineers, or artists from other disciplines (dancers, writers, or video artists, for example)—is central to musical practice of all kinds. For this reason we are also likely to take into consideration the degree to which a student has been able to co-operate effectively with her peers, who, in the end, will also be a vital resource for a successful outcome. This kind of collaborative skill will be prevalent throughout the life of a musician or sound artist, and it is encouraged across the borders of all the different courses and specializations in both our undergraduate and graduate programs. The emphasis in the Music Department on *community* is not, therefore, just a matter of having a fulfilling day-to-day life, it is a professional imperative!

Finally, we are developing the idea of adding a portfolio requirement to the core undergraduate music major, to be presented at the end of the students' Junior year. This would be very similar in scope to the portfolio required of first-year graduates, and information as to what would be included in the portfolio and how it would be assessed can be gleaned from the description of the graduate portfolio process below. We hope to implement this requirement starting in the 2009/2010 academic year.

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## II — *Graduates*

The learning goals for graduate students are clearly different from those for undergraduates. Since all the graduates are holders of Bachelor's degrees, we can assume that the majority of them—the ones who have a BA in music or music-related fields—will have already been through a process similar to the one we

require of our undergraduates. An unstated but critical goal for our undergraduates is that they will be well-equipped to go on to graduate study if they so desire, and we have to make the same assumption about the students who come to us as graduates. This assumes (and obviously we can confirm it during the application process) that incoming graduates will understand music within a broad cultural, political, social, and intellectual context; that they possess knowledge of and openness to a diversity of musical styles and practices; that they can notate and read music proficiently and have excellent musicianship skills (or that they have commensurate abilities in the realm of electronic and computer music); and that they have a good grasp of Western music theory and history.

At the graduate level, however, students expect, and are expected, to have a good deal more independence, and to be substantially self-motivated in their creative work. Assessment is therefore more complex and less quantifiable. Having said that, the standard tools are operative in matters of specific skill-sets taught in the classroom. Written essays and term papers, composition analyses, orchestration exercises, or a demonstration of technical skills in the recording studio—these are all straightforward ways of showing the degree to which a student has understood and mastered the material in any given situation, and the results can be assessed according to a template similar to the one we use for undergraduates.

In more freely creative situations we wish to encourage continuous critical self-evaluation, and to foster the ability to communicate with others about what a student is trying to do, and whether or not she or he has succeeded. In this sense the "community" aspect of graduate education is crucial. The most important resource a student will have in our department is her peers - to exchange ideas, to discuss issues and problems, to compare results, to work on each others' pieces, to develop professional networks, and to understand how indispensable such relationships are in the life of a musician or sound-artist. In order to assess the students' progress in this regard we must take into account their creative independence, the quality and originality of their ideas, the discipline with which they attempt to realize those ideas, their ability to productively criticize their own and others' work, and the degree to which they can usefully evaluate their own process. It goes without saying that if there are particular "holes" in a student's knowledge there are courses to allow them rectify that; and if they need independent study for a particular project we have stellar adjunct faculty across disciplines to bring useful new perspectives, not only to the student, of course, but also to us in the ways in which we evaluate them.

The core courses for graduates are designed to further enhance skill levels and to foster discursive and critical interactions of all kinds. We also encourage

students to take courses in other disciplines such as dance, creative writing, or video, which again, can be helpful to us in our evaluation process by providing other perspectives. At the centre of the graduate learning process is the Composition Practicum, which allows intensive one-on-one study with a department or adjunct faculty member. In these sessions the students can grapple with the details of their creative process in the company of experienced and internationally successful composers and performers. In the MFA Improvisation program, Practicum students can expect to develop their art by playing music with their professors on a regular basis, and discussing the results.

In each of the Graduate programs, students are required to submit a portfolio of their work at the end of the first year. This portfolio includes written descriptions of the projects undertaken along with information on their current status, and samples of creative/scholarly work such as scores, recordings, research papers, performance documentation, and so on. Recordings are accompanied by brief notes for each CD selection, outlining the resources used in the creation of the piece and their part in its composition and/or production where relevant. These portfolios are examined by faculty and returned either with written comments or following an informal discussion. Any problems can be picked up by this process and addressed with each student individually. The pilot rubric for portfolio evaluation is attached, and will be tested in Fall 2008.

Apart from the portfolio the principle pillars of the evaluation process for graduates are the thesis performance and the thesis paper. The performance takes place during the *Signal Flow* festival for composers and electronic MFA students. MFA candidates in performance are required to present their own separate recitals. In every case the students are held to the highest professional standards. *Signal Flow* is entirely student run, with first-year graduates expected to provide the essential support for the presenting students. This support is either direct—rehearsal management, stage management, lighting, technical assistance including sound, participation as a performer, and so on—or indirect, which includes program layout and printing, poster and website design and dissemination, PR, and even catering! As part of the process the presenting students must supply a short bio or artist statement, as well as program notes describing their pieces. Our assessment therefore includes an evaluation of the totality of the students' participation, as well a detailed critique of the presented work. In the build-up to the performance, students are required to discuss their proposed work, not only with their fellow presenters as a part of the MUS 250 thesis course, but informally at one of the regular Thesis Review sessions. These once-per-semester sessions (three 3-hour blocks) bring together the entire music faculty, as well as other students, to discuss their conception, how it is progressing, and, eventually, the outcome. One of the basic ideas of *Signal Flow* is that it combines one essential element— building a

community— with another, namely, encouraging students to gain skills across the whole spectrum of professionalism in music and sound art, so that they are well placed after Mills in having a good understanding of every nuance of what it takes to put on a successful event. A career in music depends not only on the specific creativity and skill inherent in your chosen field of endeavor, but on the ability to grasp the importance of everything else that it entails, which requires no less skill and creativity on the artist's part.

The written thesis paper, defined as "an article suitable for publication in a music journal or magazine", is overseen by a committee of three faculty members who are intimately involved in the process from conception to completion, and who are effectively the examining committee when the paper is "defended" at the student's final Thesis Review session. Students usually regard this process as the most testing part of their graduate curriculum, and it is rigorous and fairly exhaustive, not to say exhausting! Writing may not be the primary talent of many musicians, but the ability to articulate your ideas and describe your work in a useful way is a critical part of professional life, whether seeking commissions, writing grant proposals, making program notes, or generating content for a website. We therefore take it seriously, and assess students, in the final analysis, on the totality of the thesis process, both performative and written.

Typically, the assessment process, when it comes to the written thesis, is more or less continuous. Serving on a thesis committee means that professors follow the whole process closely from start to finish. They help their students formulate the basic idea for the paper, advise them on the most productive ways to go about realizing it, read early outlines, and then spend an intense final month reading, discussing, and helping to edit several (never less than three) drafts of the work. The student is then required to discuss the resulting paper with the entire faculty and many of their peers. Reducing such involvement to a grid of "measurable criteria" is not necessarily the most useful way to approach this kind of process at the graduate level. The grades that are assigned to each student after this process are the result of measured discussion among faculty members who have been deeply involved with their work for two or more years. It is extremely rare for there to be any serious disagreements, and it is also pretty clear when there are consistent problems that we need to address. These have mostly involved clarifying the nature of the process, and holding the students more rigorously to deadlines, than any substantive alterations to the process itself.

Our current plan is to phase in the use of rubrics in the assessment process, beginning with a pilot version at the end of the Fall semester of 2008. We will use the attached rubric when evaluating graduating students at the end of the thesis process. We will also be asking graduating students to fill out a questionnaire to

help us to tailor the rubric more closely to our mutual needs. Based on this feedback we should be in a position to implement the full use of the system for the more numerous graduating students in Spring 2009.

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