

Guidelines: Piano Proficiency Exam

University of Mary Washington

Updated 8/16/22

Introduction

As of Fall 2020, the UMW Piano Proficiency Exam will provide students with a new way to demonstrate mastery of practical keyboard musicianship, ranging from solo performance to applied skills like score reading and improvisation. This exam will **supersede the former keyboard requirement** for the Music Major (two credits of Class/Applied Piano study). However, students are encouraged to enroll in Class/Applied Piano to help prepare them for the exam, as needed. Ultimately, the goal of the exam is to encourage students to develop practical keyboard skills that they can apply **beyond UMW** to teaching, performance, composition, etc.

For ease of scheduling, the Piano Proficiency Exam will be offered during **exam week** at the end of the fall and spring semesters on a sign-up basis. If a student is completing a piano jury, they may opt to use their jury slot for the Piano Proficiency Exam without signing up for an additional exam slot. In this case, the student may use one of their jury pieces as Part 1 of the exam (see below), as long as the piece has been preapproved. The student will also need to satisfy the Part 2 requirements (see below).

We encourage all students with concerns about the exam format due to a documented disability to contact the Director of Keyboard Studies or Music Department Chair, as well as the Office of Disability Resources, so that we can provide accommodations as needed. For semesters in which UMW is partly/fully online (due to COVID-19, natural disasters, etc.), students may perform the exam via Zoom or a similar video conferencing platform.

Exam Contents

Part 1

Play **one piano piece** that has been **approved** by the Director of Keyboard Studies (Dr. Wells). Please make an appointment with Dr. Wells (rwells@umw.edu) to check in about potential repertoire. Any of the following types of piece can count for Part 1 of the exam:

- A fully-notated **solo piano piece**.
- The **piano accompaniment** to an instrumental, vocal, or choral piece.
- A prepared performance based on a **lead sheet** (melody + chords).

The selected piece should satisfy the following requirements:

- **Both hands** should be playing for the majority of the piece.
- The material in the two hands should be **mostly independent** (e.g., the piece should not simply be a unison melody between the two hands).
- The piece should demonstrate **moderate rhythmic complexity**.

- What qualifies as “moderate rhythmic complexity” might vary depending on the time signature, tempo, etc. For instance, in 4/4, there should be some rhythms faster than a quarter note, while in cut time, there should be rhythms faster than a half note. Dotted rhythms, ties, and triplets can also boost the rhythmic complexity factor.
- When you meet with Dr. Wells, he can let you know if your piece satisfies this requirement and give you some guidance otherwise.
- A **copy of the score** for your piece (paper or digital—if digital, please e-mail to Dr. Wells) is required at the exam.
- Memorization is **not** required.

If you are unsure of the general difficulty level we are expecting for your Part 1 piece, see the Piano Proficiency Exam Appendix (separate document) for examples.

Part 2

Be able to demonstrate proficiency in **two** of the following additional categories. Your plan for this portion of the exam (scales, excerpts, etc.) must be **approved** by the Director of Keyboard Studies before you attempt the exam. Selected examples appear in the Piano Proficiency Exam Appendix, as indicated below.

- **Option a:** Be able to play the **accompaniment** for a simple **vocal warm-up** at the piano, repeating a consistent pattern and moving up/down by half steps. (Singing is not required.)
 - Any of the sample vocal warm-ups in the Appendix could qualify, but be sure you can progress through a full chromatic ascent/descent.
 - You may also come up with a different warm-up pattern, as long as it is preapproved.
- **Option b:** Prepare at least **two major** and **two minor scales** *beyond C major*, at least two of which should be in *flat keys* and two in *sharp keys*. Scales must be played **hands together**. Only **1 octave** is required, although 2-, 3-, and 4-octave scales are welcome as well.
 - Standard scale fingerings are encouraged, but not required. Aim for smoothness, continuity, and correct notes for all scales.
- **Option c:** Be able to play **any combination of two parts** from a chosen choral or string quartet score excerpt (8-16 measures)
 - If you choose an SATB choral score, be sure to prepare **all six** combinations: S + A, S + T, S + B, A + T, A + B, and T + B. Please read the tenor *in the proper register* (i.e., transpose tenor treble clef notes down an octave).
 - Similarly, if you choose a string quartet, be sure to prepare Violin I + Violin II, Violin I + Viola, Violin I + Cello, Violin II + Viola, Violin II + Cello, and Viola + Cello. Please read the alto clef *in the proper register* (where is Middle C?).

- You may choose an excerpt from one of the sample scores in the Appendix, or you may find your own excerpt, as long as it is preapproved.
- **Option d:** Be able to play, at *concert pitch*, **any line** from a chosen band/orchestral score excerpt (8-16 measures) containing transposing instruments.
 - The examiners may choose **any instrumental line** from the score you select, so be sure to practice every line.
 - You can find a sample score excerpt in the Appendix, although this one is too short (4 measures) to be used on the exam.
 - For a summary of common instrumental transpositions, see the charts given in the Appendix.
- **Option e:** Be able to play a right hand **melodic improvisation** over a left hand chord progression (containing at least 3 distinct chords--e.g., a progression consisting only of I and V chords would not qualify).
 - You might use a jazz standard, a folk song, the 12-bar blues progression, the “Rhythm changes,” etc. as the basis for your improvisation.

Grading Scheme

The examiners will apply the following grading scheme to each exam performance. A student must receive a grade of “Pass” on **Parts 1 and 2** to pass the exam overall:

- **Pass:** Student demonstrates **satisfactory to exceptional keyboard proficiency**. The Part 1 performance is generally smooth, with a consistent tempo and possibly a few minor mistakes. An attempt has been made to observe expressive markings, dynamics, and articulation indications. The Part 2 skills (scales, score reading, etc.) may contain a few errors, but the student demonstrates basic mastery of the skills and obvious preparation.
- **Borderline:** Student demonstrates **some level of proficiency**, but demonstrates **notable weaknesses** during the exam, either due to nerves or lack of adequate preparation.
 - A student receiving a Borderline grade may spend an additional day or two practicing and then retry the part(s) of the exam that received this grade. The second attempt will either receive a Pass or Not Pass grade (another Borderline-level performance will not be sufficient to pass the exam).
- **Not Pass:** Student demonstrates a **low level of keyboard proficiency**, with errors that demonstrate a **lack of basic competency** (rather than a “bad day,” which a Borderline score might imply).
 - A student receiving a Not Pass grade *on either portion of the exam* (Part 1 or Part 2) may not attempt the exam again until the following semester. The student must then retake the part(s) of the exam that they did not pass. If the student is a graduating senior, they may retake the exam after a few days, at the discretion of the faculty, to fulfill graduation requirements.