

“YOU’VE PASSED” IS IN THE PAST: REIMAGINING THE COMPREHENSIVE  
EXAMINATION PROCESS FOR DMA STUDENTS IN VOICE

By

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A LECTURE-DOCUMENT

Presented to the School of Music & Dance at the University of Oregon  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts

June 2026

““You’ve Passed” is in the Past: Reimagining the Comprehensive Examination Process for DMA Students in Voice,” a lecture-document prepared by Trevor Andrew Cook in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in the School of Music and Dance.

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance

### **“YOU’VE PASSED” IS IN THE PAST: REIMAGINING THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION PROCESS FOR DMA STUDENTS IN VOICE**

The Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) comprehensive examination – colloquially known as "comps" – has long served as the terminal academic assessment required for doctoral candidates to advance to degree candidacy. Despite its enduring presence in doctoral education, this process has remained largely unchanged for decades, raising substantive questions about its relevance and efficacy in preparing DMA graduates in voice for the demands of a 21st-century career. This research investigates the historical foundations of both the DMA degree and its required comprehensive examination, surveys the scope, modality, and duration of examination processes currently administered at ten peer institutions across the United States, and examines scholarly arguments both for preserving the examination in its current form and for expanding or revamping it into a more practically oriented assessment. Findings reveal that while most institutions assess candidates' scholarly and performance competencies, few meaningfully evaluate pedagogical skills – despite the reality that a significant proportion of DMA recipients pursue careers that center on teaching in academia. Drawing upon established educational principles, including retention of information, transfer of knowledge, and backward design, as well as valuable lessons learned from a small-scale survey of DMA recipients, this research proposes a reimagined three-part comprehensive examination. The proposed model evaluates candidates on their vocal area of expertise, their capacity to engage critically with music in the 21st century, and their practical teaching and keyboard

competencies. This structure aims to produce graduates who are more comprehensively prepared for their roles as performers, teachers, and scholars. This research ultimately argues that the comprehensive examination should function not as an assessment of rote memorization, but as a meaningful, forward-looking measure of a candidate's readiness to contribute to the musical field as performers, teachers, and scholars upon completion of their degree.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I wish to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Craig Phillips for his assistance in the preparation of this document and his support in helping me across the finish line of this degree. After two degrees and six years of study together, I can't think of anybody else who would have stuck with me, as both a teacher and a friend, through the countless trials and tribulations of my overextended life. I have been at the University of Oregon since his first day as a faculty member and, although soon I may no longer be his student, I know that he will continue to be a steady presence in my life for years to come. I also wish to express my gratitude to the members of my examining committee for the time and energy they have sacrificed on my behalf in the final stages of this degree.

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, who have supported me in every way since I sang my first note, thank you for always encouraging me to do my best in music and life. Had you been the only audience I ever had the privilege of singing for, it would have been more than enough.

To my wife, who earned this degree alongside me in everything but name, none of this is possible without you. I am able to be the best version of myself only because of you. Through all the madness and chaos that is our life, thank you for continuing to choose me every day. I know that can't always be the easiest choice to make.

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## CHAPTER I: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DMA

The honorary degree of D.M., Doctor of Music, according to the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) bulletin (57th meeting), was first granted in 1927, but there was significant trouble with the honorary degree due to the “frequent granting of the degree for fees paid rather than on the basis of musical and academic studies successfully pursued.”<sup>1</sup> The reputation of the honorary degree had deteriorated to such an extent that it ultimately harmed its recipients. NASM had records of the PhD being awarded in the fields of music education, musicology, and composition, but there was no equivalent for those who could possibly be “better suited to the administrative tasks of a director” or exceptional performers suited for a career in academia.<sup>2</sup> The need for a new degree was conceived by a group of respected musical leaders appointed by NASM, which included deans and arts administrators from some of the most prestigious music schools in the country. This group was known as the Graduate Commission. Beginning in the early 1940’s and culminating with the 1951 Graduate Commission Report led by Howard Hanson, the DMA or Doctor of Musical Arts degree was established as a professional doctorate to follow the B.M. and M.M degrees.<sup>3</sup>

Hanson noted that “a performance doctorate, would advance a system of academic recognition for the performing musician similar to that of a medical doctor.”<sup>4</sup> He wanted to establish this degree to preempt the shortage of qualified musicians teaching at the collegiate level because he believed that “exemplary performer(s) who did not possess a doctorate might be

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Glidden, “The D.M.A.: An Historical Perspective,” in *Proceedings of the 57th Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music* (Reston, VA: National Association of Schools of Music, 1982), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Glidden, “The D.M.A.: An Historical Perspective,” 157.

<sup>3</sup> Glidden, “The D.M.A.: An Historical Perspective,” 157.

<sup>4</sup> Marvin E. Latimer, “The Nation’s First D.M.A. in Choral Music: History, Structure, and Pedagogical Implications,” *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 32, no. 1 (2010): 20.

denied appointment of tenure.”<sup>5</sup> The Graduate Commission’s decision to award this degree to an initial six universities (University of Southern California, University of Florida, Indiana University, Northwestern University, University of Michigan, and University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music) did not come without significant backlash from music critics and academics alike. Columbia University musicologist Paul Henry Lang wrote in Howard Taubman’s *Times* musical critic column:

The university is not a place for the training of performers--it is a contradiction of terms. We have excellent conservatories, which, as you again correctly observe, do not concern themselves with doctorates; they produce accomplished musicians, and a fine musician does not require a degree. Now we are to have doctors of playing or singing. I can very well see what this will mean: an earnest violinist who spends all his time on improving his art and consequently won't have time to seek ‘a doctorate,’ will be left behind by some ersatz fiddler who, by obtaining a questionable degree, will be acceptable to some august college in preference to the more accomplished artist. When the conservatories feel the pinch of competition thus created for their graduates, they too will establish a degree factory and turn out the doctors of piccolo playing or duo pianism.<sup>6</sup>

Taubman’s critique remains relevant, and although it is difficult to speculate on how academia might have developed for musical performers without the establishment of the DMA, Hanson’s prediction has largely proven accurate: the majority of collegiate appointments, particularly tenure-track positions at R1 universities, prefer or require this terminal credential.

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<sup>5</sup> Latimer, “The Nation’s First D.M.A. in Choral Music,” 20.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Taubman, “A Matter of Degree: Eastman School Sets Up Doctorate for Musicians,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 1953.

Many DMA recipients go on to have successful careers outside of academia doing any number of jobs, but a significant percentage of degree earners are looking to continue their careers in higher education. In 1951, when Hanson believed there weren't enough performers earning doctorates, much the opposite can be said in the year 2026. There are significantly more students earning DMAs than there are positions for them to fill, but universities continue to confer the degree. The last piece of historical significance pertaining to the granting of the DMA is a written debate between Howard Hanson and the aforementioned Professor Paul Henry Lang of Columbia University. Dr. Lang's feelings "that no musical activity other than scholarship in the university calls for a doctor's degree" evoke a similar sentiment to arguments for and against the comprehensive examination process.<sup>7</sup> Howard Hanson's response, as documented in the *New York Times* the following week, shaped several of the core arguments presented in this study:

Dr. Lang attempts to clinch the argument by asking why the practical musician needs a degree. This is a very good question. May I in turn ask why a professor needs a degree in musicology. Can he not prove his scholarship without the academic stamp of approval?<sup>8</sup>

While the value of this degree within both society and the academy remain a subject of debate, the "proof" that Howard Hanson brings into question in his rebuttal can be quantified and measured by a more standardized comprehensive examination process. Even though music performance has an inherently subjective evaluation process, the standardization process much be grounded in creating objective assessments to measure competency. Through those assessments, a determination can be made on a candidate's readiness to contribute to the musical field as a teacher, scholar, and performer.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Henry Lang, "Letter to the Editor," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1953.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Hanson, "Letter to the Editor," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1953.

## CHAPTER II: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

The term “Comprehensive Examination” is usually only heard at the highest levels of collegiate education. Comps, as they are known colloquially, are seen as a rite of passage for doctoral students to prove they have at their disposal the requisite information to begin the research or dissertating process. Their history can be traced back to medieval times when the oral examination tradition in guilds was passed along from apprentice, to journeyman, to master, and their primary goal was to preserve tradition and culture.<sup>9</sup> As books became cheaper and began to replace the master, more information was expected of those being examined and public “acts” were replaced by written examinations. This process was first recorded by the master of Trinity College in the year 1730.<sup>10</sup>

The first use of these examinations was based on necessity. Without the use of the internet, or access to the written word in any way, scholars had to prove their comprehensive understanding of all pertinent information to their profession. The university model was created for the teacher, but, unfortunately, soon “began to minister to a growing number who sought within its gates an acquaintance with the cultural products of the past--a mark that would clearly distinguish them as possessors of leisure, members of the educated class.”<sup>11</sup> As this class of individual took up more of the universities resources, the purpose of the examinations became less defined and “the disputations degenerated into wordy battles on trivial issues.”<sup>12</sup> The university model recovered to make the exams venerable to our modern eyes, but it is worth noting that even in their infancy they had brushes with individuals who sought to make the exams nothing more than a party trick.

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<sup>9</sup> E. S. Jones, *Comprehensive Examinations in American Colleges* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Comprehensive Examinations in American Colleges*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, *Comprehensive Examinations in American Colleges*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, *Comprehensive Examinations in American Colleges*, 7.

Although dated, with Jones publishing his work on Comprehensive Examinations in the year 1933, many of the same ideas ring true almost 100 years later:

Two philosophies have emerged concerning examination. One group of educators has examined for factual content, rigorously and often in minute detail ... Another group, much less certain as to goal, has vaguely sought to determine the “power” or intellectual potentialities of the candidate to raise new issues and solve problems.<sup>13</sup>

As the history of this exam divided these ideas, the future of these exams hinge on how examiners synthesize these two philosophies into one approach. One of the most recent critiques comes from a 2003 article where Halpern and Hakel say, “it would be difficult to design an educational model that is more at odds with the findings of current research about human cognition than the one being used today at most colleges and universities.”<sup>14</sup> Professors will often default to the style of teaching that best fits them, not their students, which is most often the same way they were taught. Students are taught via lecture to meet “narrowly construed goals (like big exams),” as opposed to being “taught tools that they can use outside the immediate context (the course, the exam) in which they learn them.”<sup>15</sup> This educational process and terminal assessment mindset is likely to persist regardless of critiques from education scholars; however, there remains an opportunity to engage more fully with lessons from past practices. Ninety-three years after he wrote the questions, this study aims to answer the two that E.S. Jones posed regarding the psychological justification of comprehensive examining, “First,

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<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Comprehensive Examinations in American Colleges*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Diane F. Halpern and Milton D. Hakel, “Applying the Science of Learning to the University and Beyond,” *Change*, July-August 2003, 37, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 42.

does it measure effectively the quality of learning? Second, ... does it set a pattern which facilitates the learning process and also creates a mental attitude favorable to enduring scholarship?"<sup>16</sup> The focus of this work is to address a contemporary problem for today's students, but will also engage with pertinent historical questions where the evidence permits.

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, *Comprehensive Examinations in American Colleges*, 16-17.

### CHAPTER III: A COMPENDIUM OF CURRENT EXAMINATION PROCESSES

In this compendium of the Comprehensive Examination process for DMA students in voice, the study collected information to survey the scope, modality, and duration of various comprehensive examinations at ten different universities. Universities were selected based on two criteria: their standing as peer institutions to the University of Oregon – classified as either R1 research institutions or comprehensive music schools – and the availability of their testing materials to the general public. This chapter briefly describes the comprehensive examination process at each university with the intent of gauging how well each program prepares candidates to contribute to the music field as performers, teachers, and scholars. Comprehensive information regarding the scope and format of each university's comprehensive examination was compiled from university websites and graduate handbooks and condensed into tables found in the appendix. As one of the governing bodies for DMA accreditation, this chapter begins with NASM's expectations for the DMA in vocal performance and a brief overview of NASM's accreditation process.

#### National Association of Schools of Music

NASM lists the DMA in vocal performance as follows:

**Vocal Performance.** The doctoral degree program in performance emphasizes presentation in a specific performing medium. Performance competence is at the highest professional level with historical and theoretical knowledge supportive of the development of individualized interpretations. Competencies also include a broad knowledge of repertory and literature. Additional studies in pedagogy are recommended.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *NASM Handbook 2024–25* (Reston, VA: National Association of Schools of Music, January 17, 2025), 147.

This description should outline what every university should aim to assess in their comprehensive examination, since the description is being written by the governing body accrediting their degree. Therefore, the universities should be evaluating their candidates with questions related to historical knowledge of repertoire, theoretical knowledge of opera, oratorio, and other song forms, as well as possible questions on pedagogy and practical application of that knowledge. When looking at the information collected about comprehensive reviews, as recorded in the appendix, the NASM handbook is much more vague as to how the knowledge is to be quantified and leaves the entire examination process to the design of individual schools as long as the “Comprehensive reviews cover the major field of study, particularly as defined by the degree title.”<sup>18</sup> It is not a bad idea to give more power to the university, as they know their student body better than NASM, but establishing a more structured outline or baseline knowledge might aid both member universities and students in understanding what is expected of them when they enroll in a DMA program. NASM does not comment on the duration of the exam or the modality in which the test should be administered.

Similarly to NASM allowing the universities to design their own comprehensive exams, self-study is the core their accreditation process. In NASM’s *Procedures for Institutions*, NASM implores institutions applying for membership for their focus to be on self-evaluation rather than reporting.<sup>19</sup> The goal is for the self-study process to help define an institution’s purpose and understand common challenges and opportunities

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<sup>18</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *NASM Handbook 2024–25*, 135.

<sup>19</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *Procedures for Institutions*, September 2025 ed. (Reston, VA: National Association of Schools of Music, 2025), 1. <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/07/M-2025-Procedures-for-Institutions-Final-03-02-2026.pdf>.

present within the organization.<sup>20</sup> As outlined in the Appendix A Evaluation Calendar, the self-study and review of supporting documents facilitate an accreditation process that “balances two concerns: (1) an institution’s ability to fulfill NASM standards for programs offered; and (2) evaluation of institutional achievements based on the purposes and aspirations determined by specific institutions and for specific curricula.”<sup>21</sup> While the accreditation process allows for significant procedural flexibility, it takes a minimum of two years to complete.

### **University of Oregon**

The University of Oregon has a set modality and duration for their DMA students in voice. The comprehensive examination is structured in two parts — a written exam followed by an oral defense — with the two components separated by a one-week interval. The written portion begins at 8:10AM and ends at 4:45PM, allowing for approximately eight hours of uninterrupted writing time. All answers are typed on a computer without access to the internet and examinees are required to answer eight out of ten questions in essay form. Rather than requiring the rote recall of facts, the questions are drawn exclusively from the examinee's area of study and are designed to challenge candidates to synthesize information and construct well-reasoned arguments. None of the questions require recall from information outside the area of musical expertise (i.e. music theory or symphonic music history) and only one question requires writing by hand. That examination question is a selection of song texts in which the examinee must write the International Phonetic Alphabet symbols underneath each individual letter to show

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<sup>20</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *Procedures for Institutions*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *Procedures for Institutions*, 1.

mastery of pronunciation in Italian, French, German, and English and an understanding of IPA symbols.

The oral defense, defined by the University of Oregon as an in-person defense of the written portion of the exam, lasts two hours and is taken a week after the written examination. For clarity, the term *oral examination* refers to an examination process in which candidates are expected to answer questions on new, previously untested material. The term *oral defense*, by contrast, refers to a process in which candidates are questioned on previously prepared written work, such as a written exam or another prepared document. This oral defense does not ask the examinee to offer new information or demonstrate any new skills, but serves to clarify any answers that seemed unclear or confusing when executed under the stressful circumstances involved in the comprehensive examination process. The University of Oregon's comprehensive examination effectively measures the scholarly capabilities of its DMA voice candidates, while the three recitals presented prior to the examination assess their performance skills. However, the current process does not yet fully evaluate the candidate's teaching skills.

### **University of North Texas**

The DMA in vocal performance comps at UNT are perhaps one of the most thorough examination processes both in scope and preparation. Like the University of Oregon, this institution divides its comprehensive examination into two components: a written examination and an oral examination. The written exam takes place over a two-day period of test taking, six hours each day, with the first day being dedicated to testing related specifically to vocal performance and the second day being dedicated to a related field of the student's choosing. The related field could range from something closely

related, like vocal pedagogy, to a more distinct specialization such as historical performance practice, choral conducting, or music education. The hour-by-hour breakdown addresses many of the same topics addressed in the University of Oregon's exam, but one major area of study stands out: recital building.<sup>22</sup>

The area of recital building is one of vital importance for the DMA graduate regardless of what their professional goals are after receiving their degree. If they choose to be a performer and venture into the world of opera, musical theater, oratorio, church music, or art song, they will invariably be asked to present recitals to patrons or donors of whatever their chosen medium is. For freelance performers, success depends on understanding their audience, having a strong awareness of their own vocal strengths, anticipating local audience preferences, and selecting varied, engaging repertoire. Of greater importance, however, is the expectation placed upon DMA graduates who enter academia: they must possess not only a thorough knowledge of their own repertoire, but also a broad familiarity with the repertoire appropriate for any student or voice type they may encounter in their studio. Assigning music for a different voice type than your own is one of the greatest challenges to anyone aspiring to teach voice and the University of North Texas is preparing their graduates for success by making this a part of their comprehensive examination process.

In contrast to many DMA-granting universities, UNT's oral portion of the comprehensive examination is designed to further assess a candidate's competency rather than defend the written portion of the examination. The ninety-minute examination (eighty minutes for examination and ten minutes for deliberation) encompasses questions

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<sup>22</sup> University of North Texas, "DMA Final Exam," University of North Texas College of Music, accessed December 8, 2025, <https://music.unt.edu/voice/handbook/final-exam/dma.html>.

drawn from any area of music within the expected knowledge base of a DMA voice candidate. The knowledge base is established by the doctoral committee and need not be developed in consultation with the candidate. After an intensely rigorous program of study and subsequent written examination, this form of examination sounds like what the authors of *How People Learn* caution examiners against the “Don’t get caught not knowing something” style of testing.<sup>23</sup> In short: the candidate must know everything. This style of examination has been demonstrated by educational researchers to be one of the least effective methods of assessment, as students who memorize substantial amounts of information for an exam rarely retain it long-term.

### **University of Washington**

The University of Washington has a written component and an oral component to their examination process, not unlike other universities, but uses the written exam as a prerequisite to be able to take the oral examination. The written exam consists of a 72-hour take-home essay derived from an annotated bibliography on one of three topics – repertory, research, or pedagogy – and submitted to the committee three weeks prior to the exam.<sup>24</sup> This is one of the first exams where students are given a task and asked to use all of the modern tools at their disposal to answer the questions. Memorizing information has its merits, but asking students to think critically and evaluate them on the “power” of their intellect (asking questions and solving problems) seems like a more valuable exercise. In essence, this written examination process is what Leonard Cassuto

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<sup>23</sup> Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, with additional material from the Committee on Learning Research and Educational Practice. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> University of Washington School of Music, *DMA Exam Guidelines*, June 23, 2023, [https://music.washington.edu/sites/music/files/documents/dma\\_exam\\_guidelines\\_6\\_23\\_23.pdf](https://music.washington.edu/sites/music/files/documents/dma_exam_guidelines_6_23_23.pdf).

describes as using comps “for what they were designed for: to identify students who are best suited for dissertation work along with those who are not.”<sup>25</sup> If a student is able to complete this task, it proves that they are properly equipped to proceed to the dissertation process. The University of Washington is unique in requiring a dissertation rather than the more common lecture document. The dissertation requires a minimum of 25,000 words, while the lecture-document consists of a 50–60-minute lecture coupled with a 10,000-word document; both exclude front matter, footnotes, bibliography, and appendices.

The oral examination is a more demanding test environment than the written exam. After passing the written exam in one topic, the oral exam is administered and students can be asked questions pertaining to the written component as well as the three fields of expertise in their chosen field: repertory, research, and pedagogy.<sup>26</sup> Unique to the University of Washington's examination is its assessment of current research within the field. This not only prepares candidates to engage with the academic environment immediately upon graduation, but also positions them to contribute to the body of scholarship as published faculty members. Addressing pedagogy from a theoretical standpoint is valuable, but the exam still lacks a practical component related to teaching.

### **Michigan State University**

Michigan State University distinguishes itself from the other institutions examined in that its DMA in voice imposes no area-specific requirements. Every DMA performance candidate at MSU takes the same written comprehensive examinations. The two written examinations take place at university-sanctioned times and are mass

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<sup>25</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> University of Washington School of Music, *DMA Exam Guidelines*.

examination events; the first exam, musicology, taking place in the morning from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM and the second exam, music theory, taking place in the afternoon from 1:30 PM to 6:00 PM.<sup>27</sup> Both exams take questions from the graduate course offerings in their prospective disciplines over the past five years.<sup>28</sup> It is reasonable to expect that students possess the requisite knowledge to answer essay questions on material from courses they have already completed. However, retesting factual recall from previously passed classes may be less effective than assessing students' intellectual flexibility in addressing performance-related challenges or teaching scenarios.

Michigan State University does not have a comprehensive oral examination; however, there is an oral defense component to the lecture-document that takes place at the conclusion of the candidate's lecture-recital. Including the written examination, Michigan State University thoroughly assesses a candidate's readiness to contribute to music scholarship. However, there is no mention as to whether or not any practical teaching skills will be assessed during the comprehensive examination process.

### **Florida State University**

At two and a half hours, Florida State University's written comprehensive examination is the shortest written examination documented in this research. Within this 150-minute exam, 60 minutes are dedicated to translating a text in one of three languages: German, French, or Italian.<sup>29</sup> This process is unique to their exam and serves to reinforce the voice department's stance that language and translation is the foundation

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<sup>27</sup> Michigan State University College of Music, "Doctoral Comprehensive Exams," accessed December 8, 2025, <https://music.msu.edu/resource/doctoral-comprehensive-exams/>.

<sup>28</sup> Michigan State University College of Music, "Doctoral Comprehensive Exams."

<sup>29</sup> Florida State University College of Music, *Graduate Music Handbook 2025*, updated July 2025 (Florida State University School of Music), <https://music.fsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Graduate-Music-Handbook-2025-FINAL.pdf>. 22.

of singing. The translated text then becomes a part of the candidate's oral examination, during which the candidate offers a reading is evaluated on fluency and pronunciation. The comprehensive nature of this specific examining process, following knowledge from theoretical all the way to practical, is one of the best ways of evaluating retention and transfer of information. The other parts of the written examination are a 90-minute essay question and a presentation of a prospectus. This prospectus constitutes the official proposal for the work to be done on a lecture-document and includes:

the statement and scope of the problem, hypotheses, definitions, assumption, limitation and significance of the study, justification of the topic, a brief review of related research, procedures and methods to be followed, anticipate organization of the proposed document, and a bibliography.<sup>30</sup>

Together with the oral examination, these components assess the candidate's readiness to advance into the research and lecture-document phase of their degree.

The duration of the oral examination is up to the examining committee, but its scope is defined by the Program of Studies form submitted by the student earlier in the semester. The Program of Studies form informs the examining committee of the material the student can reasonably be expected to know, based on their coursework, and ensures that all questions fall within those parameters. This approach contrasts with some examinations that require students to demonstrate knowledge beyond the score of their current degree program. When the scope of information is well-defined, both the faculty and the students benefit from the ability to create questions that serve to evaluate an individual candidate on their own musical knowledge and career preparedness. In

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<sup>30</sup> Florida State University College of Music, *Graduate Music Handbook 2025*. 35.

addition to these questions, the student will also receive a final approval of their prospectus and be asked to define various terms and names associated with their area of study.<sup>31</sup>

### **University of Rochester, Eastman School of Music**

At Eastman, the comprehensive examination represents the pinnacle of achievement for DMA candidates, as the university does not require a lecture-document following its completion. For all DMA candidates, the written examination prioritizes general music knowledge over area-specific expertise. As with Michigan State University, Eastman's written examination is administered as a mass examination event, scheduled and conducted over the course of two days. On day one, the first half of the exam focuses on terminology. A list of thirty terms is presented, and the candidate has to correctly and thoroughly define twenty of them. The afternoon of day one focuses on score identification. Students are expected to identify the composition's historical period, composer, title, and other relevant musical or historical characteristics. Day two begins with essay questions, either one long form question or two small form questions, and ends in the afternoon with a theoretical analysis of either a tonal or post-tonal piece of music.<sup>32</sup> Notably, DMA candidates in voice must possess extensive knowledge of orchestral and symphonic repertoire, regardless of their inclusion of vocal music. Everybody must know everything about every instrument, musical style, time period, and composer, even if it falls well outside of their area of expertise.

The subsequent oral examination is two hours in duration and focuses on the DMA student's area of expertise. It is administered by the student's primary professor, a

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<sup>31</sup> Florida State University College of Music, *Graduate Music Handbook 2025*. 22.

<sup>32</sup> DMA Comprehensive Examination Survey, Trevor Cook. April 2026.

music history professor, a music theory professor, and another professor relating to the student's specific coursework or secondary area of specialization. There is no purposeful connection from the written exam to the oral exam and any correlating information is purely coincidental. Eastman was at the forefront of the movement to install the DMA as a professional degree, but, although they are looking to revamp their comprehensive examination, their current model does not look any different than it may have looked for the first exams back in the 1950s. In 2026, where information is available at the touch of a button, the need for memorization of dates and names does not hold the same level of importance as it once did. Eastman has an opportunity to lead the field by moving away from broad memorization-based testing and toward examinations that more deeply emphasize a candidate's area of specialization. How they make this change will decide how successfully their graduating DMAs can achieve as teachers, scholars, and performers.

### **University of Colorado - Boulder**

Among the institutions examined in this research, the University of Colorado at Boulder has the longest written examination duration, second only to the University of Iowa's month-long examination, which will be discussed later. The examination is administered in two writing windows — Thursday and Friday, followed by Monday and Tuesday — with the intervening weekend serving as a rest period. DMA students take the exam remotely and are expected to write from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM over the four days of examination. At 32 hours of active testing time, this ranks among the longest written examinations.<sup>33</sup> The exam involves questions from the five members of the

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<sup>33</sup> University of Colorado Boulder College of Music, "DMA Degree Guidelines," accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.colorado.edu/music/academics/graduate-advising/dma-degree-guidelines>.

student's doctoral advisory committee with three members being from the student's area of study, one being an "outside" member from the music faculty, and one being a "PhD" member of the music faculty. Three of the days are devoted to members of the primary area of study with two half-day questions being administered by the outside and PhD members on the fourth day of examination.<sup>34</sup> All questions prepared by the advisory committee are informed by their musical expertise and familiarity with the candidate, but are not limited in scope to the student's coursework or area of specialization. When an exam includes content beyond a student's coursework and permits advisory committee members to give little to no information about their questions, it no longer accurately assesses what a student can reasonably be expected to know at the conclusion of their degree.

The DMA in Voice at CU Boulder is distinctive in that it combines performance and pedagogical training, rather than performance alone. This prepares graduates to be strong candidates in the job market but also requires significantly more coursework than performance degrees at peer institutions. It is difficult to justify how much of a student's time can be given to both their own practice and performance, as well as that of their students, when the bulk of their degree is spent preparing for an exam that has the ability to test them on subjects that have no value to them in their future career prospects. This is the sort of student that Dr. Lang was lobbying against in his letter to the *New York Times* back in 1953.<sup>35</sup>

Accompanying the written examination is also an oral examination, with all five members of the advisory committee present, of approximately two hours in duration.

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<sup>34</sup> University of Colorado Boulder College of Music, "DMA Degree Guidelines."

<sup>35</sup> Paul Henry Lang, "Letter to the Editor."

The oral examination is both an examination where new information can be presented and an oral defense of the written examination. The topics for new information may cover anything related to singing, anatomy, or acoustics of the singing voice.<sup>36</sup> Of particular note in the degree plan is the understanding of vocal disorders, how to recognize them, and when to refer students to a doctor for treatment. Given the central importance of vocal health in the professional singing world, this level of knowledge must be requisite for anyone seeking the DMA in voice.

### **University of Texas - Austin, Butler School of Music**

The Butler School of Music has some semblance of a more “traditional” comprehensive examination, by way of their specialized examination process, but what sets their program apart, in both scope of exam and career preparedness, is their repertory and academic portfolios. From the requirements of the “DMA Personal Annotated Tradition/Repertory Portfolio,” it is clear that UT wants its students to have a wide variety of performing experiences under their belts and the ability to affect cultural change in music while preserving tradition. In their annotations of works presented, the school is chiefly concerned with how distinctive musical characteristics are interesting and meaningful to the performers.<sup>37</sup> The act of taking years of study about music and applying it to the more primitive idea of “how did it make you feel” is such a valuable exercise at the end of a terminal degree program. This form of examination helps students create an annotated CV of important musical works they have performed for possible job applications. It also reinforces the cultural significance of music and

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<sup>36</sup> University of Colorado Boulder, College of Music. *Doctor of Musical Arts Degree Plan*. 2023. <https://www.colorado.edu/music/media/11158>.

<sup>37</sup> University of Texas at Austin, Butler School of Music, *Graduate Handbook* 2025. 41.

highlights the value of pursuing a terminal degree beyond the confines of academia.

Coupled with the culturally relevant repertory portfolio is the self-reflective academic portfolio.

The DMA Personal Annotated Academic Portfolio concerns itself with the cultural implications of music-making, but how it develops self-awareness for a professional life after college is where its merits shine brightest. The introduction to the portfolio asks students: “describe your work, how you would revise it today, and how it will/can inform your future research or professional goals as a musician, pedagogue, entrepreneur, and so on.”<sup>38</sup> If every self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses, be it in music or other disciplines, was presented with the focus on professional success, I think students would value the exercise more than they do absent that context. Talking about how the act of research is ongoing, even when the paper has been completed, and how points of revision for modernity’s sake are necessary, is another great point that this portfolio makes. I think the inclusion of these portfolios as a portion of their comprehensive examination sets up graduates from UT to seamlessly make the step into professional, academic, and entrepreneurial life.

### **University of Iowa**

The University of Iowa, while being unclear as to whether their DMA in voice requires an oral comprehensive examination, is very specific to the scope, duration, and modality used for its written examination. The written exam is a take-home exam that all DMA students, regardless of area of specialization, are required to take. The examination is composed by the candidate’s four-member doctoral committee, with content informed

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<sup>38</sup> University of Texas at Austin, Butler School of Music, *Graduate Handbook 2025*. 42.

by their submitted curricular plan of study. The exam aims to evaluate competency in the areas of music theory, music history, song literature, and vocal pedagogy for DMA candidates in vocal performance.<sup>39</sup> While very standard in its scope and modality (the exam is to be completed digitally and turned in via emailed PDF format) where it truly distinguishes itself is its duration.

In Spring 2026, the exam began on March 6th and concluded at 12:00 PM on April 3rd.<sup>40</sup> An examination duration of nearly a month is unprecedented among the institutions surveyed in this research. On one hand, it gives the student ample time to thoroughly and completely develop ideas to answer the doctoral committees questions, but that time is given with a caveat: “Students are NOT allowed to use the Internet, notes, scores, etc., unless approved by the question writer and it is specifically stated on your original question.”<sup>41</sup> Given that the debate around academic integrity is at an all-time high, this request, coupled with the extended exam duration, puts both the university and the examining student in a difficult position. When questions are posed that demand critical thinking, synthesis, and complete comprehensive development of an idea, this type of exam is ideal. However, when factual knowledge is involved, a complication arises. If a student is actively studying material related to their comprehensive examination, they may incidentally encounter information relevant to their test questions. There are undoubtedly contingencies in place to prevent this from happening, but a shorter examination period could yield better and more integrous results than a month-

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<sup>39</sup> University of Iowa School of Music, *Doctor of Musical Arts Degree: Voice*, 2023, <https://music.uiowa.edu/sites/music.uiowa.edu/files/2023-11/DMA%20Voice%202023.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> The University of Iowa School of Music, “Graduate Student Policies,” accessed December 15, 2025, <https://music.uiowa.edu/graduate-student-policies>.

<sup>41</sup> University of Iowa School of Music, “Graduate Student Policies.”

long writing process coupled with the other daily stressors in a candidate's life. This examination offers extensive evidence of preparing a candidate for scholarly life after graduation, but does not provide a practical assessment of the candidate's teaching capabilities.

### **University of North Carolina - Greensboro**

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's DMA examination process is the epitome of the "standard" form of comps. The written examination is administered over three full days; the subsequent oral examination, scheduled within one month of passing the written portion, is conducted in a single two-hour session<sup>42</sup> The exam is constructed by the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee and takes into account all potential proficiencies demonstrated at the university as well as those from previous institutions and transfer credits. Ultimately, candidates are expected to demonstrate mastery across any area the committee addresses, consistent with the principle that "The most successful examinations require the ability to recall, apply, analyze, and evaluate."<sup>43</sup>

The oral examination exists to address areas of weakness in the written portion and to evaluate areas not assessed in the written portion. Nothing is particularly revolutionary about their process, but their four-tiered grading system of satisfactory with distinction, satisfactory, unsatisfactory in one or more areas, or unsatisfactory, gives candidates a more comprehensive understanding of their examination results.<sup>44</sup> The

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<sup>42</sup> University of North Carolina at Greensboro, College of Visual and Performing Arts, School of Music, *Music DMA Handbook*, rev. 2024 (Greensboro, NC: University of North Carolina at Greensboro), accessed December 15, 2025, <https://vpa.uncg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Music-DMA-Handbook-Rev2024.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> University of North Carolina at Greensboro, College of Visual and Performing Arts, School of Music, *Music DMA Handbook*.

<sup>44</sup> University of North Carolina at Greensboro, College of Visual and Performing Arts, School of Music, *Music DMA Handbook*.

grade that stands out is “unsatisfactory in one or more areas.” Whereas many comprehensive examinations take failure in one section as failure of the entire exam, UNCG makes it possible for students to retake only the portions in which minor gaps in knowledge are identified. Maximizing a student's ability to succeed, while also keeping evaluation standards high, is the goal all comprehensive exams should aim to achieve.

## **CHAPTER IV: ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION PROCESS**

Although arguments can be made for a fundamental restructuring of the comprehensive examination process, doing so risks diminishing the value of broad foundational knowledge – a cornerstone of doctoral-level scholarship. As DMA voice recipients often turn to teaching as part of their portfolio careers, this knowledge is vitally important to conducting one-on-one instruction. When a student poses a question to their instructor, they expect an answer grounded in scholarship and practical experience – not one derived from an internet search. Several of the comprehensive examinations documented in this research are designed to cultivate precisely this depth of knowledge in their graduates. This represents the core argument for preserving the comprehensive examination in its current form.

As established in Chapter III, a compelling argument for preserving the current scope and duration of the comprehensive examination process lies in its role in preparing candidates for their final document. The research process is filled with countless hours of reading and writing and is often a very solitary process. The comprehensive examination is very much the same in its execution and preparation. A doctoral advisory committee might reasonably contend that if a candidate can write coherently and extensively under immense stress, they can certainly manage the demands of a lecture-document. This idea, however, is what prompted Leonard Cassuto to write:

But what's the best way to identify good dissertators? Subjecting them to an oral inquisition under immensely stressful conditions, an exam that covers everything

they've ever learned in the field, has little to do with the act of dissertation writing. It's like having to clear a high jump in order to qualify for a marathon.<sup>45</sup>

His argument may well elicit an emotional response from opponents of the comprehensive examination process; however, it is arguments grounded in educational research and practical experience that hold greater persuasive force with its proponents.

A further argument in favor of the examination is its function as an academic barrier that ensures only the most committed scholars advance, thereby preserving a standard of musical excellence. After World War II, the exam grew out of necessity when too many graduate students were being admitted to be managed by dissertation alone.<sup>46</sup> Even after the examination was no longer strictly necessary as a means of managing graduate student population growth, it persisted as the standard against which all DMA candidates — past, present, and future — would be measured. The university's graduate reputation became inextricably tied to the rigor of its comprehensive examination. The Eastman School of Music, for example, has long been regarded as one of the premier institutions for music instruction in higher education, and is equally renowned for the rigor of its comprehensive examination process. Through the preservation of this process, the school has maintained its reputation, even if educational research suggests necessary revisions.

This educational research is rooted in “student-centered outcomes and demands backward design – that is, designing a course [or exam] from its goals backward.”<sup>47</sup> A description and purpose of the comprehensive examination process is available in most, if not all, graduate handbooks, but the goal of the examination is omitted. The goal, therefore, should be as follows:

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<sup>45</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess*. 42.

<sup>46</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess*. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess*. 35.

**The candidate is prepared to contribute meaningfully to the field of music as a performer, teacher, and scholar.**

When evaluated against this goal, however, none of the examination processes documented in this research achieves all three of these outcomes. The examination processes discussed achieve this goal partially, but the demands of a career path for a DMA voice graduate far exceed the scholarly-focused examinations currently being administered across the country. Of the institutions documented in this research, the University of Texas at Austin presents the most comprehensive approach through the integration of performance and academic portfolios; even so, its examination lacks a practical teaching component. The practical teaching component is the missing piece of a full comprehensive assessment.

To supplement the findings of this research, a qualitative exploratory survey was conducted, soliciting input from DMA recipients regarding their experiences with the comprehensive examination process. Participants were selected based on their status as DMA degree recipients, but all answers were collected anonymously. The small sample size of this study does not aim to draw conclusions, but rather learn valuable lessons from qualified individuals on what steps can be taken to improve the comprehensive examination process. The survey asked them one important question: If you could add or change something about the comprehensive examination process to better fit the 21st century model of being a teacher, researcher, and performer, what would it be? The majority of participants made it clear that the comprehensive examination does not adequately prepare them for the “multifaceted demands of a career in this decade.”<sup>48</sup> Chapter V will take these concerns and weave them through a proposed solution for a standardized comprehensive exam for DMA voice candidates.

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<sup>48</sup> DMA Comprehensive Examination Survey, Trevor Cook.

## **CHAPTER V: PROPOSED SOLUTION**

As demonstrated in Chapter III, one of the only consistencies among the comprehensive examination processes surveyed is the examination's existence itself. Each school is testing on their own definition of “comprehensive” and it creates an unclear picture of what a DMA candidate should be expected to know. A level of standardization should be established across degree-granting universities, either through NASM or a different governing body, to make expectations more transparent. Although it is beyond this research to bring such far-reaching ideas to fruition, the proposed examination can serve as a blueprint for how they might be realized. The solutions already exist; educators and administrators need only identify what DMA candidates should be expected to demonstrate. For vocal performance majors, we must assess four key areas: Foundational knowledge in area of expertise (voice), lecture-document preparation, music in the 21st century, and practical teaching evaluation.

Foundational knowledge will be assessed through a candidate’s ability to write intellectually about the areas of vocal literature, vocal diction and languages, as well as vocal pedagogy. Lecture-document preparation will be evaluated through a prospectus defense, as defined by Florida State University, in which the candidate presents the prospectus to a committee that examines its contents and assesses the candidate's readiness to continue researching and writing on the topic. Assessing a candidate's understanding of music in the 21st century ensures they have a thorough comprehension of their chosen career path and a clear vision for how they intend to contribute to its sustained future. All of this preparation culminates in a practical teaching evaluation where the candidate must demonstrate the practical application of their foundational knowledge in conducting a voice lesson. This final assessment measures

the candidate's ability to retain and transfer knowledge, affirming their rightful academic advancement towards the Doctor of Musical Arts degree.

Before proposing a solution, it is imperative to establish what this research identifies as the core requirements for a DMA in voice. The following checklist focuses primarily on DMA candidates completing coursework designed to prepare them for their roles as performers, teachers, and scholars, as well as for successful completion of their comprehensive examinations.

## CORE REQUIREMENTS

### DMA: Music Performance in Voice

| <b>Graduate Entrance Exams (GEE):</b><br><i>Term/Year passed or Review Courses (indicate which)</i> | <b>Theory:</b> | <b>Aural Skills:</b> | <b>History:</b> | <b>Piano:</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------------|
|                                                                                                     |                |                      |                 |               |

| <b>Non-Voice Core Requirements</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |             |             |                         |                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Term</b> | <b>Year</b> | <b>* Credits Needed</b> | <b>Credits Earned</b> |
| MUS 601 Research Methods in Music                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |             |             | 2                       |                       |
| MUS 602 DMA Thesis Organization                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |             |             | 2                       |                       |
| <b>General Degree Requirements</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |             |             |                         |                       |
| <b>Large Ensemble or Opera</b> (1 years) ( <i>Give course no. and title</i> )                                                                                                                                                                     |             |             | 2                       |                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |             |             | 2                       |                       |
| <b>Foreign Language Study</b><br>Take one year of college study in each of the following languages: French, German, and Italian and earn an average grade of B– or higher in the last term. This requirement can be waived due to previous study. |             |             | 8                       |                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |             |             | 8                       |                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |             |             | 8                       |                       |

**DMA: Music Performance in Voice Core Requirements — Page 2 of 3**

| <b>Primary Area Requirements</b>                                                                                      |                                    |             |                       |                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|                                                                                                                       | <b>Term</b>                        | <b>Year</b> | <b>Credits Needed</b> | <b>Credits Earned</b> |
| MUE 669 Pedagogy and Practicum (Music Performance: Voice)                                                             |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUE 661 Italian and English Diction                                                                                   |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUE 662 German Diction                                                                                                |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUE 663 French Diction                                                                                                |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUE 664 Russian and Spanish Diction                                                                                   |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUP 60_ Functional Keyboard Instruction (1 year)<br>Proficiency and level of instruction needed determined at the GEE |                                    |             | 6                     |                       |
|                                                                                                                       | MUP                                |             | 2                     |                       |
|                                                                                                                       | MUP                                |             | 2                     |                       |
|                                                                                                                       | MUP                                |             | 2                     |                       |
| Performance Studies (Studio Instruction) (three years)                                                                |                                    |             | 24                    |                       |
|                                                                                                                       | MUP 761 Performance Studies: Voice |             | 8                     |                       |
|                                                                                                                       | MUP 761 Performance Studies: Voice |             | 8                     |                       |
|                                                                                                                       | MUP 761 Performance Studies: Voice |             | 8                     |                       |
| MUS 641 History of Opera 1                                                                                            |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUS 642 History of Opera 2                                                                                            |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUS 643 History of Oratorio                                                                                           |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUS 621 Italian and English Song Repertoire                                                                           |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUS 622 German Lieder                                                                                                 |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUS 623 French Mélodie                                                                                                |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |
| MUS 624 Russian and Spanish Song Repertoire                                                                           |                                    |             | 2                     |                       |

**DMA: Music Performance in Voice Core Requirements — Page 3 of 3**

|                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Recitals</b> (indicate which is solo recital)<br>1. Proposed term/yr: _____<br>2. Proposed term/yr: _____<br>3. Proposed term/yr: _____                                    | <b>Comprehensive Exams</b><br>Written Examination: Proposed term/yr: _____<br>Oral Examination: Proposed term/yr: _____<br>Practical Examination: Proposed term/yr: _____<br>Proposed Term/Yr of Advancement: _____                                 |
| <i>Two of the three recitals, including the solo recital, must be completed before comprehensive exams may be taken. See Procedures and Policies for further explanation.</i> | <i>All course work for the specific area must be completed prior to sitting for a comprehensive exam. Advancement follows completion of exams and submission of lecture-document proposal. See Procedures and Policies for further explanation.</i> |

| Lecture-Document                                                                                              | Term                 | Year | Needed | Earned |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------|--------|--------|
| <b>Lecture Document</b> (Minimum of 6 credits over at least two terms after term of advancement)              |                      |      | 6      |        |
|                                                                                                               | MUS 601:<br>Research |      |        |        |
|                                                                                                               | MUS 601:<br>Research |      |        |        |
| <b>Presentation of Lecture and Oral Defense of Lecture-Document</b><br><br>Proposed term/yr of defense: _____ |                      |      |        |        |

\*This Plan of study is adapted from various universities, but has been created to support this research. All course listings and course numbers are fabricated and do not relate to real course offerings at any University. Credits Needed values reflect possible credit requirements based on a DMA program at a university operating on a quarter-based academic schedule.

Notably absent from these core requirements are general music history and music theory courses. Most candidates aspiring to receive the DMA degree will have completed approximately six years of such coursework, and further study in these areas should only be pursued if deemed necessary as remedial work based on the results of the graduate entrance examination. Having established the scope of knowledge defined by the required coursework, this research will now proceed to the proposed comprehensive examination solution.

## **THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION**

### **Part I: Area of Expertise (Voice) / Written: 6 hours**

One survey participant indicated a desire for:

Fewer questions about music history and theory. By the time I reached the end of my studies, I had accumulated three degrees' worth of credits in courses related to that material. To be tested on it again not only felt redundant, but also unrelated to the types of expertise actually required of me professionally.<sup>49</sup>

This sentiment is corroborated by other survey participants, and is reflected in the core requirements checklist, as such requirements take valuable time and energy away from students pursuing careers as singers and teachers. Part I of the proposed exam takes this consideration into account, mirroring the examination process at the University of North Texas. This portion is organized as follows, with example questions listed in each category:

Hour 1-2: Essays on art song, orchestral works, opera and oratorio **PICK 2**

- Trace the origins and development of the German-language art song cycle
- Discuss the roles that Gluck and Mozart played in the transition towards enlightenment ideals in Opera, highlighting both the philosophical and musical shifts between Baroque and Classical opera. Reference specific works/events to support your answer

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<sup>49</sup> DMA Comprehensive Examination Survey, Trevor Cook.

Hour 3: Short answer and identification (Terms and Personages)

- Define the following terms comprehensively: song cycle, messa di voce, and oratorio

Lunch

Hour 4: Diction (transcription/rules)

- Complete the IPA transcriptions of 2 of the 4 examples presented in English, Italian, German, and French.

Hour 5: Recital Building

- Build an undergraduate recital program for someone of your voice type. Make sure to include various styles and time periods of music and at least 4 different languages.

Hour 6: Vocal Pedagogy

- Define the terms “appoggio” and “chiaroscuro.” How would you define these terms to an inexperienced singer?

It is a reasonable expectation, and practically applicable, for all recipients of the DMA to be able to answer these questions.

**Part II: Defense of Writing - Prospectus Defense - Music in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century / Oral: 2 hours**

Although some universities choose to forgo the oral examination and oral defense, they are an important measure of a candidate's ability to engage in meaningful academic discourse. However, rather than preparing for numerous variations of the exam, candidates should be assessed through a clearly structured three-part oral examination. Following the models at the University of Oregon and Florida State University, the examination begins with time to defend and clarify responses from the written portion (30 minutes). In the week or two following the written exam, the student will be given the opportunity to think more deeply about the answers to their questions and rectify any weaknesses or shortcomings through the oral defense. The oral defense should always go hand in hand with the written examination.

Following that portion of the examination will come the defense of the DMA candidate's lecture-document proposal (30 minutes). Leonard Cassuto writes about this process in regards to biology programs in the United States saying, "The purpose of such an exercise ... is to 'simulate, as much as possible, the professional demands that a scientist will face while pursuing a research career.'"<sup>50</sup> This is not suggesting that a career in music—especially singing—demands the same research rigor as one in the sciences; however, the ability to defend a proposal demonstrates an exceptional level of preparation for beginning the lecture-document process. If a student passes the comprehensive examination without showing that they are prepared to move on to the research phase, then the process has failed them.

The final hour of this proposed oral examination process was developed through the analysis of existing oral examination structures and the results collected from the survey. The art of singing, especially classical singing, is without a doubt a niche area of study rooted in an era long since passed, yet one that many still endeavor to pursue. It is therefore critically important for a DMA candidate to articulate coherently the relevance of this art form and offer insights into how they intend to help it not only persevere, but thrive. While questions pertaining to classical singing in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century may be tailored to individual students based on their specific interests or areas of expertise, the following example questions are designed to inspire a stimulating conversation between the candidate and their committee:

- How can we as teachers and performers continue to promote representation and diversity in the classical song repertoire?
- Discuss challenges resulting from changes in the classical music professional landscape.

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<sup>50</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess*. 42.

- There are many who maintain that Western Classical vocal technique is the “right way to sing.” Is this a problematic opinion? Why or why not?
- Has the use of technology helped us in the world of Classical Voice? If so, how?

The purpose of this subjective line of questioning is to assess whether candidates are prepared to enter the professional music world with a comprehensive understanding of its demands and the resilience to endure its inevitable challenges. The comprehensive examination shouldn’t exist to only evaluate the student and scholar, but also the person.

### **Part III: Teaching Evaluation and Keyboard Competency / Practical: 30 minutes**

The final portion of this comprehensive exam is adapted from a music education rite of passage known as the Sophomore Review. In the Sophomore Review, music education majors had to show an intermediate level of ability over reading sheet music, memorizing ear training exercises and their tonal functions, teaching a simple song via call and response, and demonstrating functional piano skills. Though undeniably challenging for a second-year college student, the exam is a necessary measure of what it takes to become a music educator. Given that many recipients of the DMA in vocal performance go on to incorporate teaching into their portfolio careers, it is practical that both pedagogical and keyboard skills be assessed as part of the comprehensive examination. The exam would be conducted as follows:

- As part of the practical portion of your comprehensive examination, you will give a 30-minute voice lesson to a student, selected at random, on the scheduled day of examination.
- The first 15 minutes of the lesson will be a demonstration of your teaching technique utilizing vocal warm-ups you believe best fit the student.

- The second 15 minutes will be a coaching on a song, in English, where you will be expected to provide some level of functional keyboard support to the student in addition to vocal musical instruction.
- You will be assigned a song in English with a simple piano accompaniment two weeks prior to the exam from the student's repertoire, so you may practice the piano accompaniment (examples "Take, O take those lips away" by Roger Quilter and "At the River" by Aaron Copland).

For some candidates – particularly those who served as graduate employees or teaching assistants throughout their degree program – this portion of the examination may feel elementary. However, not all DMA candidates conclude their coursework with extensive teaching experience, which can make this process considerably daunting. Up to this point, the proposed exam balances levels of stress with academic necessity; however, this mock lesson replicates what college professors are asked to demonstrate when interviewing for a position as professor of voice. As a voice professor, one can prepare for meetings and lectures, but arguably the most consequential aspect of the role — and the most difficult to prepare for — is the voice lesson itself. Candidates must be ready for every conceivable voice that comes into their studio and adjust to them dynamically throughout the lesson. Any meaningful evaluation of candidates must begin with an assessment of their fundamental ability to perform the core responsibilities of the role.

All three parts of this exam would be evaluated individually, like the model presented at UNCG, meaning they can all be passed or failed separately and that only portions deemed "unsatisfactory" would have to be retaken by the candidate. One bad moment should never define a comprehensive body of work.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

This research has sought to reimagine the design of the comprehensive examination for DMA candidates in vocal performance. Through an examination of the historical origins of both the DMA degree and the comprehensive examination process, it can be argued – at least at some universities – the examination needs to be reevaluated to better suit the academic and professional environments of today’s DMA candidates. A survey of current practices across leading institutions, and an evaluation of their strengths and shortcomings, shows how a revamp and standardization of the exam could better serve the realities facing modern DMA candidates. The comprehensive examination remains in its current antiquated iteration because it signifies the rite of passage of all those who received the degree before us. It upholds the rigor and prestige of the program and signals readiness for a terminal writing project; however, its current manifestations prioritize knowledge for knowledge's sake, memorization over application, and the ability to take a test over the ability to communicate understanding.

This proposed solution is not intended to be definitive, but rather offer a framework grounded in the educational theory of backward design and a survey of several individuals comprehensive examination experiences. By aligning the content of the comprehensive examination with the actual demands of a singing career in the 21st-century—knowledge of repertoire, exceptional singing ability, promotion of diverse cultures and mindsets, exemplary pedagogical skills, etc.—the comprehensive examination can be transformed from a retrospective measure of accumulated knowledge into a forward-looking demonstration of professional competence and desire to contribute to the field of music.

Ultimately, the question is not whether comprehensive examinations should exist, because they always will, but what purpose they should serve. If the DMA degree is to maintain

its value and credibility, its final academic assessment must do more than confirm that a student has “passed.” It must instead affirm that the candidate is prepared to contribute meaningfully to the field as a performer, teacher, and scholar. Reimagining the comprehensive examination in this way ensures that it remains not a relic of academic tradition, but a vital and relevant bridge to the professional world beyond it.

## APPENDIX A: EVALUATION CALENDAR

### FOR BACCALAUREATE AND GRADUATE DEGREE-GRANTING INSTITUTIONS OR POSTSECONDARY, PROFESSIONAL NON-DEGREE-GRANTING INSTITUTIONS APPLYING FOR NASM MEMBERSHIP OR RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP

— Commission on Accreditation —

| <b>ACTION</b>                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>For Consideration at the<br/>Commission Meetings in November</b>                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Notice of Intention to Apply Form*<br/>to the NASM National Office</b><br><i>(Please see note below)</i>                                                                    | At least two years before the projected date of<br>the NASM on-site visit, and not later than one<br>year prior to the visit          |
| <b>Self-Study Document, Institutional<br/>Catalogs, and Supportive Material (If<br/>applying for Music Therapy accreditation)<br/>to the NASM Visiting Evaluators</b>          | At least four weeks before the visit                                                                                                  |
| <b>Application, Self-Study Document,<br/>Institutional Catalogs, and Supportive<br/>Material (If applying for Music Therapy<br/>accreditation) to the NASM National Office</b> | At least four weeks before the visit                                                                                                  |
| <b>Application Fee to the<br/>NASM National Office</b>                                                                                                                         | <i>Members:</i> upon receipt of invoice<br><i>Non-members:</i> with Self-Study                                                        |
| <b>Visitation Period</b>                                                                                                                                                       | February 15 – June 1<br>(or as arranged with staff)                                                                                   |
| <b>Visitors' Report to the NASM National<br/>Office</b>                                                                                                                        | Within six weeks of visit                                                                                                             |
| <b>Visitors' Report to the Institution</b>                                                                                                                                     | Upon completion of National Office review<br>process, which commences upon receipt and<br>concludes as quickly as possible thereafter |
| <b>Institution's Optional Response to the<br/>Visitors' Report to the NASM National<br/>Office</b>                                                                             | As early as possible and not later than<br>October 15                                                                                 |
| <b>NASM Commission Meets</b>                                                                                                                                                   | Third week in November                                                                                                                |
| <b>Institution Notified of Commission Action</b>                                                                                                                               | Within thirty days of Commission meeting                                                                                              |

**\*Please Note:**

In order to be assured of an evaluation during the preferred time period, institutions should submit the Notice of Intention to Apply form at least two years before the projected date of the on-site visit; however, this form must be received in the NASM National Office no later than one year prior to the on-site visit date.<sup>51</sup>

**APPENDIX B: EXAM DURATION AND SCOPE BY SCHOOL**

National Association of Schools of Music (NASM)

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Undefined and to be established by individual institutions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>a. Comprehensive Reviews. Comprehensive reviews cover the major field of study, particularly as defined by the degree title, and any other associated or required fields specified by the institution. At the completion of coursework or during the development of proficiencies, the function of comprehensive review is achieved through mechanisms such as written or oral comprehensive examinations, seminars providing summary evaluation, or a cumulative series of reviews. At the doctoral level, successful completion of this review qualifies the student for degree candidacy.</p> <p>b. Final Examination. At the doctoral level, the final examination may be given after all other degree requirements have been met, including the final project. This examination may be in defense of a dissertation; it may be concerned with the major performing medium and its repertory; or it may be concerned with compositions submitted for the degree.<sup>52</sup></p> |

<sup>51</sup> National Association of Schools of Music. *Procedures for Institutions*. September 2025 ed. Reston, VA: National Association of Schools of Music, 2025. Accessed May 22, 2026. <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/07/M-2025-Procedures-for-Institutions-Final-03-02-2026.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> National Association of Schools of Music, *NASM Handbook 2024–25*.

# University of Oregon

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|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Written: 1 day / Oral: 2 hours                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>Comprehensive examinations may include questions about any aspect of the musical specialty in which the student is working and are not limited to coursework taken as part of the doctoral degree program. Consult your faculty advisor for a study guide.</p> <p>Comprehensive examinations have written and oral components, with the written component taken first.</p> <p>Both the written and oral portions of the examination will be evaluated by the committee that prepared them. The student's responses will be evaluated on the basis of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each response demonstrates thorough knowledge of the topic and is of sufficient depth, breadth, and precision to answer the question fully and correctly.</li> <li>- Each response distinguishes between information of central importance and peripheral importance and focuses on the former.</li> <li>- Each response demonstrates the student's ability to organize and report information, analyze and evaluate that information, and draw conclusions intelligently.</li> <li>- Each response is written in good English prose style and follows accepted rules for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence and paragraph structure. Each oral response is in good conversational English, is rationally organized, and is clearly presented.<sup>53</sup></li> </ul> |

<sup>53</sup> University of Oregon. "C4: Comprehensive Examinations." *University of Oregon Blog*, August 14, 2018. <https://blogs.uoregon.edu/gradmus/2018/08/14/c4-comprehensive-examinations/>

University of North Texas

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| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Written: 2 days / Oral: 90 minutes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>These qualifying examinations are designed to assess the student's breadth and depth of knowledge within all areas of classical vocal performance, the student's chosen related field, and the student's coursework in music history and theory when relevant. The content is not limited to information covered in course work taken at UNT.</p> <p>The exam will vary in specific content from professor to professor. It may consist of essays, short answer questions, score identification/analysis, I.P.A. transcription/rules of lyric diction, and creation of sample recitals. A sample schedule for the written portion of the exam is outlined below. Major professors will provide to and confirm with the student the actual exam schedule no less than one month prior to the exam. Students are advised to budget their time in the exam to address each question as thoroughly as possible.</p> <p>Day 1 - Major Field</p> <p>Hour 1: Essay (Art Song)</p> <p>Hour 2: Essay (Orchestral works for voice - opera, oratorio, etc.)</p> <p>Hour 3: Short answer and identification (Terms and Personages)</p> <p>Lunch</p> <p>Hour 4: Diction (transcription/rules)</p> <p>Hour 5: Recital Building</p> <p>Hour 6: Flexible Topic, e.g., course building, or pedagogy, terms, concepts, etc.</p> <p>Day 2 - Related Field</p> <p>The Oral Exam</p> <p>Some committee members will provide general information about the nature of their questions, but others may opt not to offer any details in advance of the examination. Candidates are responsible for scheduling the time and location for this exam directly with the committee members.</p> |

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|  | <p>No less than a week before the exam the student must provide to the committee via e-mail a copy of their degree recital programs, program notes, and an accurate DMA degree plan.</p> <p>The student should schedule a 90-minute window of time for the entire exam. The examination portion may last up to 80 minutes, providing 10 minutes for the committee's deliberations.</p> <p>During the examination, candidates may ask the committee members for clarification of questions posed; one clarification request per question is allowed, after which the student will either attempt an answer or ask for a new question. If the student does not provide sufficiently detailed answers in the written exam, these omissions can and will be addressed in the oral exam.<sup>54</sup></p> |
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#### University of Washington

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| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Written: 72 hour take-home / Oral: Defined by individual program                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>Students will develop deep expertise in three fields/areas, usually defined as [A] Repertory (a specific body of works, such as French Mélodie), [B] Research (such as current scholarship on American musical theater or the Second Viennese School), and [C] Pedagogy (issues related to teaching in the student's primary area). The student will develop the fields in consultation with the supervisory committee, and will provide the committee with annotated bibliographies for review by the committee and to be used as the basis of the examinations. Since there are only three areas, the committee will expect considerable breadth and depth of knowledge.</p> <p>Note: Areas A and B differ crucially in their focus and aims. The principal sources of area A are musical works; the principal sources of area B are books, articles, and dissertations about musical works and topics.</p> <p>Voice: In the voice area, Students will submit an annotated bibliography for one topic at least three weeks prior to the written exam.<sup>55</sup></p> |

<sup>54</sup> University of North Texas, "DMA Final Exam."

<sup>55</sup> University of Washington School of Music, *DMA Exam Guidelines*.

Michigan State University

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| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Written: 3 hours for musicology and 4 1/2 hours for theory<br>Oral: No oral exam, only oral defense of dissertation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>Students who are enrolled in the Doctor of Musical Arts degree program in music performance are required to take the comprehensive examinations in music theory and musicology. Please see above for an explanation of the format of this examination.</p> <p>Musicology:</p> <p>The comprehensive examination in musicology takes place in the morning, typically from 9:00 a.m.–12 noon. Students will receive a list of questions, with one question drawn from each of the 800- and 900-level musicology courses taught during the past five years. A maximum of two questions may be attempted and at least one question must be answered satisfactorily in order to pass this portion of the examination. Students must provide their own pencils, erasers, and writing and paper. Reference materials (in printed form, on computer media, or in any other form) are not permitted.</p> <p>Theory:</p> <p>The comprehensive examination in music theory takes place in the afternoon, typically from 1:30–6:00 p.m. Students will receive a list of questions, with one question drawn from each of the 800- and 900-level theory courses taught during the past five years. A maximum of three questions may be attempted and at least two questions must be answered satisfactorily in order to pass this portion of the examination. Students must provide their own pencils, erasers, and writing and music paper. Reference materials (in printed form, on computer media, or in any other form) are not permitted.</p> <p>The techniques, terminology, and skills addressed in a corresponding course are sufficient for answering the question satisfactorily. Reviewing course materials and consulting with the instructor of the class is strongly recommended.<sup>56</sup></p> |

<sup>56</sup> Michigan State University College of Music, “Doctoral Comprehensive Exams.”

Florida State University

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| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Written: 2 1/2 hours / Oral: At discretion of the committee                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>WRITTEN/ORAL Timed portion: (given once early in the fall term and at least once early in the spring term on a Wednesday afternoon). The total time for this examination will be two and-a-half hours.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Translation examination (60 minutes): The student chooses one of three languages (French, German, or Italian) and will have one hour to complete the translation. The student may use a dictionary and verb book but no grammar book for this process. This translation will become part of the student's preliminary examination.</li> <li>▪ Essay question (90 minutes): The student will receive an essay question that is designed by the major professor specifically for the individual student as a result of a review of the student's coursework at FSU. The supervisory committee must approve the question before it is given to the student.</li> <li>▪ A final draft of the prospectus must be submitted as part of the preliminary examination.</li> </ul> <p>Oral portion: Copies of the Program of Studies Form that was completed early in this semester must be distributed to all members of the DM Supervisory Committee at least two weeks prior to the oral examination. In addition, the final draft of the prospectus and copies of the answers to the timed portion of the written examination must be given to the supervisory committee at least two weeks prior to the oral examination. The student is responsible for the distribution of the prospectus and the Program of Studies Form and the major professor, for the distribution of the answers to the written portion of the exam. The oral exam will include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ a defense of the timed written answers including an oral reading of the foreign language passage that was translated,</li> <li>▪ a review and final approval of the prospectus,</li> <li>▪ oral terminology/name identification based on the results of the diagnostic examination and coursework for the degree, (Note: a copy of the diagnostic examination will be given to the supervisory committee members by the major professor at least two weeks prior to the oral examination.)</li> </ul> |

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|  | ▪ and any other oral questions the committee members would like to present based on the content of the student's Program of Studies Form. <sup>57</sup> |
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University of Colorado - Boulder

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| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Written: 4 days / Oral: 2 hours                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>The questions may pertain to the student's coursework or research interests, or they may address broader topics or areas of expertise that are expected in the student's chosen discipline. Some committee members will provide general information about the nature of their question, but others may opt not to offer any details in advance of the examination. Comprehensive exams are administered online except for questions that require library reserve/reference materials (that cannot be checked out to the student) and/or no use of the internet. The student may choose the order in which to write responses for each day of the examination. Students write for four consecutive weekdays, and are scheduled to write from 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m., Thurs. through Fri., rest on the weekend, and then finish the exam on the following Mon. and Tue.<sup>58</sup></p> <p>Major Field Examination. In addition to the Preliminary Examinations, there is a Major Field Examination in voice that is a written diagnostic exam focused on Vocal Pedagogy. The following resource materials are suggested for study for the major field exam for voice students.</p> <p>Vocal Pedagogy: LeBorgne and Rosenberg, <i>The Vocal Athlete</i> 3rd. ed. 2025.; Ragan, <i>A Systematic Approach to Voice</i>, 2nd ed. 2026.</p> <p>The comprehensive examination in voice, consisting of two parts (written and oral), may include:</p> <p>Anatomy, Physiology, Models of Voice Production, Perception and Acoustics of Singing Vocology (including voice disorders and when to refer), Vocal Pedagogy Methodology and Strategies, History (including style) of Vocal Literature, Repertoire for Singers<sup>59</sup></p> |

<sup>57</sup> Florida State University College of Music, *Graduate Music Handbook 2025*.

<sup>58</sup> University of Colorado Boulder College of Music, "DMA Degree Guidelines,"

<sup>59</sup> University of Colorado Boulder, College of Music. *Doctor of Musical Arts Degree Plan*.

University of Texas - Austin, Butler School of Music

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|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Timeline Undefined - projects have a deadline, but a more flexible start date after the completion of coursework for the DMA                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | <p>Doctoral students in Performance, Composition, or Jazz Studies are required to complete a comprehensive examination that will include common and specialized portions. The common comprehensive examination consists of the Personal Annotated Tradition/Repertory Portfolio and Personal Annotated Academic Portfolio portions.</p> <p>DMA Personal Annotated Tradition/Repertory Portfolio</p> <p>As part of your comprehensive examination for the DMA, we ask you to provide an “annotated portfolio” of 10 total musical examples that demonstrate your musical experiences leading to the doctorate. They may be scores, recordings, or any other format that you consider appropriate. They should reflect your knowledge of “your tradition” in the extended sense, in contrasting as well as complementary ways.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your portfolio must contain at least TWO selections from each historical period.</li> <li>• Your choices must also represent the musical traditions of at least THREE regional traditions.</li> <li>• Finally, at least one example must be from a vernacular/commercial/folk tradition rather than an art/concert tradition.</li> </ul> <p>As an introduction to your Annotated Portfolio, please briefly describe how your examples fulfill the criteria above (10 examples, at least 2 from each historical period, at least 3 regional traditions represented, and at least 1 from vernacular/commercial/folk tradition). Please provide any information that would help identify the examples for the reviewers (title, composer if known, date of composition/publication/performance). If possible, please also provide a URL or link to the score, recording, and/or other format as appropriate. As your annotation for each example, you may choose any of the following formats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide at least 5 sentences or bullet points about distinctive musical qualities that you consider meaningful and/or interesting AND at least 3 sentences or bullet points about important elements of the cultural context in which your chosen example was created.</li> </ul> <p>—or—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a paragraph of approximately 300-500 words that addresses both distinctive musical qualities and important elements of the cultural</li> </ul> |

context of your chosen example;

—or—

- By petition to and approval of the Musicology/Ethnomusicology Division, any other way you propose that will clearly indicate your knowledge of the distinctive musical qualities and cultural elements of your chosen example. As a conclusion for your Annotated Portfolio, please write a reflection of between 300 and 500 words about how you chose the 10 examples in your Annotated Portfolio, and how the 10 examples in your Annotated Portfolio reflect — in connected, similar, and/or complementary ways — the tradition(s) that you are now continuing as a Doctor of Musical Arts.

#### DMA Personal Annotated Academic Portfolio

As part of your comprehensive examination for the DMA, we ask you to provide an “annotated portfolio” of three academic projects you have completed during your doctoral coursework. These can be in a variety of formats (term papers, web resources, oral presentations, audio/visual multimedia, etc.), but (1) should all include a theoretical reflection around musical repertoires and traditions that is supported by engagement with scholarly work on the topic (scholarly articles, books, and similar sources), (2) should represent a variety of periods and musical traditions as well as methodologies, and (3) should all stem from academic courses you have taken during your DMA. You should submit the original projects (or provide the URL for multimedia work) with annotations that are based on feedback you received from your instructor and/or peers and on your own reflections and that explain how you would reconsider/reframe/reconceive your project today. In other words, what changes would you make to your project to make it more effective and relevant? How has your perspective or knowledge on the subject changed? Would you use these projects for your future professional activities and how?

Your portfolio must contain:

- An introduction (500-750 words).
  - o In the introduction, describe your work, how you would revise it today, and how it will/can inform your future research or professional goals as a musician, pedagogue, entrepreneur, and so on.
- The original projects representing a variety of periods, musical traditions, and/or methodologies with annotations.
  - o In your annotations, discuss the flaws and strengths of each project and indicate at least 5 ways in which you would revise it. Be specific by

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|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <p>pointing to individual sections of the project and by providing clear examples of your suggested changes. Don't forget to attach or link your actual original projects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Your annotations can be in the following formats: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Bullet points (at least 5; one set for each project)</li> <li>o A single paragraph (300-500 words; one paragraph for each project)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Specialized Examination</p> <p>Varies across disciplines. Can have an oral portion if deemed necessary by the chair of the examining committee. Scope is limited to area of expertise, but duration and modality vary.<sup>60</sup></p> |
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#### University of Iowa

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|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Take home exam, student is given approximately a month to complete the exam (Spring 2026 was March 6-April 3). The exam is to be completed without any aid of notes or the internet unless stated in the question.                                                                       |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | Comprehensive Exams: Comprehensive exams must be taken. This exam evaluates the candidate's knowledge of music theory, music history, song literature and vocal pedagogy. A Plan of Study form must be completed with the advisor prior to taking the comprehensive exams. <sup>61</sup> |

#### University of North Carolina - Greensboro

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|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Exam Duration</b> | Written: 3 days / Oral: 2 hours                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Exam Scope</b>    | The Preliminary Examination, constructed by the Doctoral Advisory Committee, comprises the written portion and a subsequent oral portion. The examination is rigorous and demanding, and requires synthesis on the part of the student. The questions are often historical, analytical, stylistic, biographical, bibliographical, pedagogical, or contextual in nature. The most successful examinations require the ability to recall, apply, analyze, and evaluate. Many questions deal with performance practices, ornamentation, traditions, history, and pedagogy, or any other substantive matter. Factual questions as well as interpretive questions are included. <sup>62</sup> |

<sup>60</sup> University of Texas at Austin, Butler School of Music, *Graduate Handbook 2025*. 42.

<sup>61</sup> University of Iowa School of Music, "Graduate Student Policies."

<sup>62</sup> University of North Carolina at Greensboro, College of Visual and Performing Arts, School of Music, *Music DMA Handbook*.

## **APPENDIX C: SURVEY RESULTS AND IRB COMPLIANCE**

As a part of my research on this topic, I conducted a brief survey that was sent out to 20+ recipients of the DMA degree. When possible, these individuals received their degrees in vocal performance, though this was not always the case. The survey was conducted anonymously with minimal risk to the individual. The only potential point of identification was the university that granted them their degree. Seven participants agreed to take the survey representing a diverse set of backgrounds and career paths, ranging in approximate ages from 30-70, and representing four different universities. Attached is a copy of the survey as well as the relevant information from each participant.

### **Survey Questions**

1. You are invited to participate in a research study on an evaluation of the comprehensive examination process for DMA candidates. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to share the university that you received your DMA from and your opinions on the value of the comprehensive examination process for the 21st century DMA recipient. Participation is expected to last 5-10 minutes. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to participate. Even if you decide to join now, you can change your mind later. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact Trevor Cook at [tcook5@uoregon.edu](mailto:tcook5@uoregon.edu).

Do you agree to participate?

- All participants checked yes to this question

2. What university did you receive your DMA from?
3. What year did you graduate?
4. What is your current occupation?

5. If you could add or change something about the comprehensive examination process to better fit the 21st century model of being a teacher, researcher, and performer, what would it be? Why?

PARTICIPANT 1

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alma Mater</b> | Eastman School of Music                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Response</b>   | I believe that a component of the exam that focuses on real-world application: creating a lesson plan for a semester course, creating a financial/tax plan for as an individual going into the freelance performance track, showing skills/training in conflict resolution, anything that would be beneficial to the practical side of a career in the arts. |

PARTICIPANT 2

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alma Mater</b> | Eastman School of Music                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Response</b>   | During my time at Eastman, the exam was taken over the course of two days with the first day being devoted to terminology (30 terms, answer 20) and score identification. The second day was a long essay or two short essays generally having to do with music history followed by an analysis of a tonal or post-tonal piece (student's preference). The two-hour oral exam that followed had no connection to the written exam and the four members of my committee only questioned me on specifics relating to my specific degree. I was the smartest I have ever been, or ever will be, while preparing for this exam, but I retained nothing. These exams should be targeted to the degrees of the students. Make sure they are specific for each instrument rather than generic information. |

PARTICIPANT 3

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alma Mater</b> | University of North Carolina at Greensboro                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Response</b>   | Fewer questions about music history and theory. By the time I reached the end of my studies, I had accumulated three degrees' worth of credits in courses related to that material. To be tested on it again not only felt redundant, but also unrelated to the types of expertise actually required of me professionally. |

#### PARTICIPANT 4

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alma Mater</b> | University of Oregon                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Response</b>   | I think I was the last generation in taking the comprehensive exam as the following year the guidelines changed. But from what I recall is just a test on memorization of biographical and musical aspects of certain pieces and dates. I would have preferred to have an exam that is more updated with current topics of our profession. That would be teaching certain pieces, technical problems of advanced pieces, what do we think about representation in music (women composers, Latin American, Asian, African music), and probably essay-oriented questions that challenge our analysis skills. |

#### PARTICIPANT 5

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alma Mater</b> | University of Oregon                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Response</b>   | The standard written and oral components feel relevant and necessary. Yet, there are several components of a career in performing, teaching, and researching that are not always taught, and most definitely not evaluated in the comprehensive process. I believe they should start including elements related to technology (software, hardware, social media, artificial intelligence), entrepreneurship, and social and professional engagement. Adding some of these elements would better reflect the realities of the field and help prepare students for the multifaceted demands of a career in this decade. |

#### PARTICIPANT 6

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alma Mater</b> | University of Oregon                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Response</b>   | I would change the model to involve more evaluation of my capabilities as a teacher. After completion of my DMA, I felt like I was thrust into a world where I had never actually been evaluated to do the thing I will spend the rest of my life doing. The nature of the comprehensive exam is to be comprehensive, yet it turns a blind eye to the principal work that I will be doing to make money in my line of work. |

PARTICIPANT 7

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Alma Mater</b> | Florida State University                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Response</b>   | Maybe not so much straight memorization of dates, as these (I think) are fairly useless. General dates are fine. More emphasis on languages, vocal technique, teaching and diction would be important. |

**UNIVERSITY OF OREGON**

Research Compliance Services

**EXEMPT DETERMINATION**

April 21, 2026

Trevor Cook  
tcook5@uoregon.edu

Dear Trevor Cook:

The following research was reviewed and determined to qualify for exemption.

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Type of Review:         | Initial Study                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Study Title:            | "You've Passed" is in the Past: Reimagining the Comprehensive Examination Process for DMA Students in Voice.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Principal Investigator: | Trevor Cook                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Parent Study ID:        | STUDY00002284                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Transaction ID:         | STUDY00002284                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Funding Source:         | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| IND, IDE, or HDE:       | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Documents Reviewed:     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conflict of Interest Form, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• Exempt Category 2 Worksheet, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• Exempt Determination Application, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• Informed Consent Form, Category: Consent Form;</li><li>• Recruitment Materials, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li></ul> |
| Approval Date:          | 4/21/2026                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Effective Date:         | 4/21/2026                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Expiration Date:        | 4/20/2027                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

**For this research, the following determinations have been made:**

- This study has been reviewed under **the 2018 Common Rule** and determined to qualify for exemption under **Title 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(i) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (non-identifiable)**.

The research is approved to be conducted as described in the approved protocol using the approved materials. Approved materials can be accessed in the protocol workspace in the IRB module of the research administration portal (RAP).

All changes to this research must be assessed to ensure the study continues to qualify for exemption. Research Compliance Services has developed specific guidance to help you understand when a modification is required before a change can be implemented. It is your responsibility to ensure modifications are submitted when required and approval secured before implementing changes to the protocol. For more information about how to prepare and submit modifications, see our Modification Review website and our Modify Study (RAP Instructions).

A regulatory continuing Review is not required for this study. An institutional approval period has been established based on your application materials. If you anticipate the research will continue beyond the approval period, you must submit a Continuing Review Application at least 45 days prior to the expiration date. For more information about how to prepare and submit a continuing review submission, see our Continuing Review Website and our Continuing Review/Closure RAP Guidance.

A closure report must be submitted once human subject research activities are complete. Closure reports are submitted through the RAP via a continuing review submission. For more information about how to prepare and submit a closure, please see our Closing your study website and our Continuing Review/Closure RAP Guidance.

Failure to maintain current approval or properly close the protocol constitutes noncompliance.

With the submission of your request, you agreed to uphold the responsibilities of the Principal Investigator listed in the Investigator Responsibilities.

If you have any questions regarding your protocol or the review process, please contact Research Compliance Services at [ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu](mailto:ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu) or (541)346-2510. The University of Oregon and Research Compliance Services appreciate your commitment to the ethical and responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

Please consider completing our user satisfaction survey. It only takes a few minutes, and we would like to hear about your experience working with our office!

Sincerely,

Lizzy Utterback

Research Compliance Services

on behalf of the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects

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