

National Association of Schools of Music

An Advisory for Music Faculty and Administrators: NASM Standards – Composition/Improvisation

The NASM *Handbook* contains the following standard for all professional undergraduate degrees in music—all degrees carrying the title Bachelor of Music, and all undergraduate degrees concerned with teacher preparation that lead to certification as a specialist music teacher, either as part of the baccalaureate degree, or immediately after in a master's program.

NASM *Handbook*, Section VIII.B.3.:

3. Composition/Improvisation

Students must acquire a rudimentary capacity to create original or derivative music. It is the prerogative of each institution to develop specific requirements regarding written, electronic, or improvisatory forms and methods. These may include but are not limited to the creation of original compositions or improvisations, variations or improvisations on existing materials, experimentation with various sound sources, the imitation of musical styles, and manipulating the common elements in non-traditional ways. Institutional requirements should help students gain a basic understanding of how to work freely and cogently with musical materials in various composition-based activities, particularly those most associated with the major field.

This advisory addresses issues beyond those considered in the document entitled *Notes for Music Faculty and Administrators: Standards for Composition/Improvisation and History/Repertory in Undergraduate Professional Degrees in Music* (December 1999; revised December 2010). This Advisory and the *Notes* can be read in conjunction with or separate from each other.

Creative Goal

A major purpose of this standard is to encourage the development of rudimentary skill and greater insight into creative and communicative processes of music through the formulation of musical ideas in purely musical terms. While gaining fundamental technical proficiency in composition and/or improvisation is important to reaching this goal, the primary intent of the standard is to help all musicians gain technical means to reach individual creative ends.

Levels

Musicians live with the driving ambition to reach the highest standards in all their endeavors. But it is usually impossible to apply such ambition to every facet of the curriculum for undergraduates who must devote considerable time and energy to an area of specialization. Thus, the standard does not require students in all professional undergraduate degree programs to become highly proficient in either composition or improvisation. The goal is to provide knowledge and skills in composition and/or improvisation at a basic level, both in terms of (1) gaining a better understanding of how music works and (2) using this understanding to fulfill the highest aspirations for work in the area of specialization. Higher levels of composition or improvisation are required for majors in specific specializations as specified in NASM standards. It is the prerogative of institutions to require higher levels of composition or improvisation for all students or students in certain majors.

(continued)

Multiple Approaches

NASM does not promote a particular approach to this composition/improvisation standard. It does not require or even suggest that a separate class be offered. Many institutions are developing these basic competencies in theory and analysis courses; others, through class piano; still others, in assignments associated with the area of specialization. Some institutions use music education courses as the vehicle, and so on through the whole spectrum of solutions that one would expect from a highly creative group of people and institutions engaged in a highly creative field. There are also the multiple connections between improvisation and the musical practices of various cultures. The Association takes no position about the time frame for developing these competencies, or about genres that may be used as a basis for study. Improvisation does not mandate jazz. Composition does not mandate classical. In the standard, both words—*composition* and *improvisation*—are free agents. Each institution chooses its own content, approach, time frame, and evaluation methods.

Long-Term Effort

As composition/improvisation standards have evolved, there continues to be general agreement that building this competency both in students and in the work of music units represents a long-term effort worth undertaking for the good of the field. The Association understands that instant change on a matter of this kind is not possible, that the pace of change and improvement will vary from music unit to music unit, and that there will be much experimentation both within and among institutions. However, it is equally understood that if, over time, all institutions work to address the standard and thus build composition/improvisation competencies in their students, the capacities of all graduates will be enlarged for service to the field, its patrons, and its future students. It is important to note in this context that the music portion of the *National Voluntary K-12 Standards for Arts Education* includes composition and improvisation. The music teaching community as a whole seems to be in common accord on the importance of this competence to musical understanding and development. Each NASM institution is encouraged to develop a long-range approach, perhaps developing a set of staged aspirations for defining *basic* in terms of expected achievements for its graduates.

Approaching the Standard

As is the case with all NASM standards, the goal is to focus on the development of student capabilities, not to set bureaucratic requirements for the operation of music units. Since accreditation is based in large part on the mission, goals, and objectives developed by each institution, perhaps the best place to start is by determining present goals and objectives for student competence in composition and/or improvisation—in other words, starting with the *what* and the *why* before proceeding to the *how*. Often, when *what* and *why* questions are answered thoroughly, the *how* questions answer themselves.

**Music units with further concerns about the intent of these standards
are invited to contact the [NASM National Office staff](#):**

Telephone: 703-437-0700 — Facsimile: 703-437-6312

Email: info@arts-accredit.org