# Strategies for Multiple-Choice Part A 18

## DEVELOPING YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

The Part A portion of the AP Music Theory exam is a daunting process at the very least. The prime objective for theory students is to combine theory fundamentals and aural skills training by listening to a piece of music and answering questions regarding the basic elements of the music they are hearing in "real time." To some students it seems an impossible task to "hear it all" when it goes by so fast with so few times to listen to the example. Contextual listening is a process of connecting all the dots and using all the tools you have available to match what the ear hears and the brain identifies. Contextual listening is a skill that musicians work on throughout their entire careers—mastery is not expected after one year of study. Don't get frustrated and stop listening. Listen smart and with a plan!

The basic elements of music such as pitch, duration, timbre, texture, form, melody, harmony, and cadences are found in every piece of music. The music in your band, choir, or orchestra class, the music on the radio or on your phone or tablet all have these elements, and therefore, provide you with many opportunities to develop your listening skills.

### WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO TO DEVELOP YOUR LISTENING SKILLS?

When you listen to music:

- Tap the beat, determine the meter, try conducting to confirm your answer (not during the exam), and consider what a particular rhythm might look like. Is there repetition of the rhythm?
- Listen for same and different. This is a *big* thing. All music is about same and different, and *if* it is different—*how* is it different? For example, what changes in the second phrase? What is the same?
- Name the instruments that are playing, and notice when instrumentation or tessitura changes.
- Identify performance elements such as tempo and dynamic, ritardando and crescendo, articulation, and ornaments such as grace notes and trills.
- Sing along! Sing the melody. Sing the bass line. Sing the root of the harmony. Use solfege. Does the melody have an anacrusis? Identify the scale degrees of the opening or closing few notes of a melody or bass line. If nothing else—sing ***Do***!

- Listen for compositional elements like scale patterns, arpeggiated or broken chords, or Alberti bass.
- Determine the overall modality: Is it major or minor? Does it modulate?
- Identify lengths of phrases and the cadence type at the end of the phrase.

## LISTEN TO MUSIC FOR THE PURPOSE OF IDENTIFYING ELEMENTS

Today we often have music playing all the time so it becomes background noise. Bring it to the front. Take notice. Focus your attention on the details. Don't be a passive listener.

## EXPAND YOUR NORMAL LISTENING HABITS

Have you ever listened to a string quartet, a piano etude, an opera aria, or an oboe solo? To gain listening skills for the AP exam you must expand and vary your repertoire or playlist.

## DEVELOP AN AURAL MEMORY

There is a certain amount of "must have" information that needs to be stored and easily (and confidently) retrieved. Many students find that they can listen in units or "chunks" of sound, rather than note by note, or one interval or chord at a time. By this, I mean have a working knowledge of these "chunks" of aural elements:

- **Major and minor scales:** scale patterns and arpeggios—ascending and descending
- **Melodic patterns:** Refer back to the "Top Ten Melodic Patterns," from Chapter 4.
- **Cadences:** By whatever means you have, whether it is to play them yourself on the piano, or practice with a software program or Internet website, learning to identify cadences by sound is a huge advantage in the aural and free-response portions of this exam. Chapter 15 will help with this.
- **Basic chord progressions:** such as I–ii$^6$–V–I. (With this chord progression, what would the bass line be?) This is covered in more detail in Chapter 20, Strategies for Harmonic Dictation.

## CONNECT THE EYES AND EARS

Throughout this guide we have discussed how all the processes overlap. See a melody and sing it. Hear a melody and notate it. See a bass line and create a melody. See the melody and create a bass line. It all works together. For example, when answering the first several multiple-choice identification questions in Part A, the most common approach is to first analyze the answers visually and identify what you **see**—*then* when the aural prompt is given, match what you hear to what is written. If you are unable to identify all four answers before the aural prompt is given, write in the margin what you hear, then go back when time allows and confirm the correct answer.

**Prepare visually. Confirm aurally.**

## TIPS FOR CONTEXTUAL LISTENING

The contextual listening examples vary in length from a short excerpt of 4–16 measures to an entire piece. *Read the information* about the example and note how many times the excerpt will be repeated. Read the questions thoroughly in the silent times between questions.

Here are some additional tips for contextual listening.

### TIP 1 Be sure to look at the terms and directions within the questions very carefully.

These include:

- **Best describes** . . .
- Includes all of the following **except** . . .
- **Ends** with or **Begins** with . . .
- **Lengthened** by . . .
- **Outside** voices (a very specific direction)
- **ONLY** (as in "listen for the rhythm only")
- **Characterized** by the use of . . .
- The **bass line** *of the accompaniment* begins with . . . (a very specific direction)
- **Embellished** with
- **Compared** to

### TIP 2 Circle the important words that are relevant to answering correctly.

- Be proactive in answering. The questions many times will direct your ear to a **specific place** in the music (phrase 2, last 3 notes, beginning progression). Prepare your brain and your ear for those specific places. Questions, and also answers, will direct you to **listen *for*** something specific (rhythm only, bass line, melody, timbre, texture, etc.). This is critical information. These terms are clues. Use them to your advantage and stay focused on the *requested task.*

**TIP**

FOCUS on what is asked for. Don't try to see the whole forest if what you need to see is only the color of the leaves.

### TIP 3 Read each question twice.

### TIP 4 Know how to answer the error-detection questions.

Within Part A there are four questions having to do with error detection. The example will be a two-part piano piece. The score is written correctly; however, the performance you hear will have four errors in either pitch or rhythm. You will hear the example four times. There are several ways you can strategize to work these questions. The directions will tell you what measures contain the errors. Circle the measures that contain the errors and *prepare first* before listening to the

example. What does the example tell you visually? Identify patterns you will expect to hear, such as tonic arpeggios, rhythm patterns (e.g., dotted notes), ascending and descending motifs, or use and placement of rests. Many students find it effective to focus on the right hand one time and the left hand the second time. If the errors are in measures 1, 3, 5, and 7, another strategy is to focus on measures 1 and 5 on the first listening and on measures 3 and 7 on the second listening. Your goal is to have three out of four identified at the end of the second listening. Use the third listening to identify the remaining answer and confirm the other three. Use the fourth listening to check your answers.

TIP 5

### What do I know just by looking at the question? How much can I logically deduce before even hearing the music?

- There is often information revealed in the one or two sentences printed before each section of questions. This is another opportunity to *prepare* your ear. For example, if the excerpt is an orchestral piece, would it most likely have a walking bass line? No, probably not. If the excerpt is from a jazz ensemble, then a walking bass is *very* likely, as is syncopation, or change of timbre.
- If a question asks about the motion of the **outer voices**—what is the *expected* motion? Contrary, of course. Once again, let your ear confirm—but at least you are thinking of what is the "norm," are *actively listening*, and have your brain engaged.
- A very common question will ask you to identify the notes using scale degrees at the beginning or the end of a phrase or section. If it is melody, what pitches commonly end a phrase? Here is where using solfege helps identify pitch. **You must be able to sing the tonic in order to be able to determine whether the last note is tonic or not, and/or how it relates to tonic.** Keep ***Do*** in your ear.
- Meter questions are common in the multiple-choice section. Here are four typical answers: (A) $\frac{2}{4}$, (B) $\frac{4}{4}$, (C) $\frac{6}{8}$, and (D) $\frac{9}{8}$. What do we know by just looking at the answers? There are two duple meters, one triple meter, and one quadruple meter. Since there is only one triple meter answer, the question is significantly easier if that is the answer. It is highly unlikely that it would be $\frac{2}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$ because they are so similar. But $\frac{2}{4}$ and $\frac{6}{8}$ would require knowing not only the grouping of the beats but also the division of the beat. *Now* you are prepared to listen.
- In many of the multiple-choice questions, one answer is correct, two answers are close to the correct answer, and one answer is far from the correct answer. Sometimes an answer is not even possible. For example, when asked to identify the structure that Phrases 1 and 2 form, the answer cannot be a parallel double period. A **double period** requires four phrases. Remember, the more you can eliminate, the closer you are to answering or even guessing correctly.
- How are the answers the same or different? Particularly with questions about progression, there are usually two answers that are similar to each other. ***Listen to the bass.*** Chord progressions tell you what note is in the bass. Figure out the solfege for the bass line of each multiple-choice answer. On the first listening you should be able to eliminate two of the answers. Two may start with I–V–I and two start with I–IV–V. Sometimes it's the ending that can help you discriminate between the progression answers because endings imply cadence.

- Look for something that *you* can identify aurally . . . perhaps the last two notes are ***Ti-Do***, the first two notes are m3 apart, the beginning is chromatic, or the ending is a melodic minor pattern . . . **prepare visually, listen *for* something, and confirm aurally.**

### TIP 6 Fill in the answers for the multiple-choice questions as you go along—not at the end.

Many states have standardized testing that students prepare for diligently in public school. The questions are multiple choice, and a bubble sheet is used for the answers. For most states these standardized tests are not timed and many teachers practice a strategy of answering all the questions first, *then* filling in the answer sheet at the end. *Do not do this on the AP exam.* There is a time limit on each portion of the exam, and a clock should be visible to all students during the exam. It's better to run out of time with three more questions to answer then run out of time with all the questions answered but only half transferred to the answer sheet.

### TIP 7 To guess or not to guess? That's a good question!

Total scores on the multiple-choice sections are based on the number of questions answered correctly. Points are not deducted for incorrect answers and no points are awarded for blank answers. Therefore, if you are not sure, guess!

- It's not always about knowing the correct answer. Sometimes we can arrive at the correct answer by eliminating the answers we know are wrong—leaving us with fewer choices.

The next part of this chapter features multiple-choice questions based on aural prompts. You have been doing these types of questions all along in the aural units, but here we have added **tips and strategies** to maximize your success with Part A multiple-choice, including contextual listening. We begin with several examples of aural identification similar to what would be on the AP exam.