

How to study for Aural/Visual Music Exams

If you are studying music in a formal setting (e.g., university, high school, etc.), most likely you will have exams where you are expected to identify audio excerpts of various pieces of music. We used to call these “drop the needle” exams, because the instructor would literally drop the needle of a phonograph onto the spinning record.

In addition, you may be expected to identify a piece of music by seeing only a part of the musical score. This requires you to be able to recognize the music visually instead of hearing it.

Here are some tips on how to prepare for such exams:

1. Listen to the music with the score.
2. Listen to the music without the score, but visualize the score in your mind.
3. “Hear” the music with the score but without actually playing the audio. This sometimes is called “auralization.”
4. Without playing the music or looking at the score, go through the list of pieces you are expected to know, one piece at a time and “auralize” each piece, that is, hear the piece in your mind’s ear.
5. Go through the list of pieces again, this time “auralize” *and* visualize the music.
6. On a blank sheet of paper, write down the complete title of all the pieces and everything you are expected to know about the piece (e.g., composer, dates, title, movement, form, etc). The best way to do this is to do one piece at a time. After you think you have written everything correctly, check what you wrote against your study guide. Do not go on to the next piece until you get everything right for that piece.