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First-Year Music Student Preparation Course

The landscape of youth musical training and expression has significantly broadened. Likewise the kinds of programs offered in the music academy have diversified to serve student interests in musical theater, jazz, rock and hip-hop, inviting those students from less traditional backgrounds to participate in music training at the collegiate level. One side effect of this diversification is that many of our students have not had the opportunity to develop what we have long-considered music fundamentals, a set basic skills related to reading music and understanding the basic building blocks of music. These skills tend to be introduced very early in a private-lesson environment and are continually reinforced over years of study. However, for a student who is a self-taught guitarist or comes from a musical theater background, those skills may have been largely bypassed. While these kinds of students may have tremendous talent and potential for success as musicians, they often struggle with much of our curriculum.

The goal of this project is to provide a set of resources to introduce incoming first-year students to these “fundamental skills” during the summer before they begin their formal training at the CU Boulder College of Music. We hope that by advancing their initial interactions with these skills that they will be more successful at navigating the curriculum when they begin their studies in the fall.

The project was essentially a first iteration of a non-moderated, micro-course in music fundamentals. It is constructed in four canvas modules: Notation, Pitch Organization, Intervals, and Triads & 7th Chords. Each module includes instructional videos and print documents to afford different modes of engagement with the concepts. For each skill we included a practice quiz which can be infinitely repeated with questions drawn at random from large question banks. Finally there is a comprehensive placement quiz

which helps the faculty identify students who will need additional support when they arrive in the fall. The course is not graded or for credit, but stands as a resource which we will strongly encourage students to engage with.

The initial outcome of this project will not be known until the end of the summer. We hope to see fewer students who need extra support based on the outcome of the placement quiz. We will also survey students in the first week of classes to learn which students took advantage of the training materials, to what degree, and why or why not? This information should help us navigate towards better engagement in future iterations. Ultimately, I expect the iterative process to continue over 3-5 years to maximize the success of the program.

The pedagogical perspectives explored in the Faculty Fellows program provided a foundational set of tools for building out the first iteration of materials. Specifically, the cohort readings and discussions in Instructional Design, Digital Pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning were invaluable in the conception of this project and for future iterations.