



University Music Programs 101

Ontario

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Introduction

If you're planning on studying music in university, you might have noticed there's a lot of extra *stuff* you have to do to get into a program. On top of that, there are a wide variety of possible programs and career paths, some of which have different requirements and totally different approaches to learning. We're here to help you navigate the process with our helpful guides! This guide gives an overview of how university music programs in Ontario are generally structured, the different kinds of programs available and things to know before you apply!

Please note that the best way to find accurate information on programs, program requirements and other subjects is via the official university website. The best way to get your question answered is to get in touch with the school!

Before You Start

One important thing to be aware of as you go into your post-secondary journey in music is that music education is evolving all the time. A few years ago, virtual or pre-recorded auditions weren't an option at most schools—now, many offer them alongside in-person auditions, or require them specifically. In the wake COVID-19, new developments in music education and changes in how we look at music's role in society, post-secondary education is changing: adjusting admissions requirements to reflect the changing interests and priorities of music students, and piloting new and exciting programs.

One notable thing specific to post-secondary music education in Ontario is that, historically, most programs expected a level of performance proficiency equivalent to Level 8 at the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) in their chosen instrument, with piano programs sometimes expecting Level 9 or higher, for acceptance. In response to the changes described above, many of these requirements no longer exist explicitly in their admission information.

If you take private lessons to help you prepare, matching an RCM requirement might be part of how your teacher prepares you. This isn't a bad thing, and many schools still give suggested repertoire that aligns with a particular Level in the RCM. The same goes for music theory—many schools are removing or changing their music theory assessment required for acceptance.

The purpose of our guides is to prepare you as best as possible to dive into the world of applying for post-secondary music programs. We can't predict how programs will evolve and change, but we can give you the basic terminology and information so you know what to look for and how to look for it. So, with that said—let's get started!

Going into Music

Music programs are generally four-year programs in which students graduate with an honours degree in music. Some are offered through a Faculty of Music at a university or administered by a Department or School of Music within a larger Faculty of Arts. Students apply for admission the year before they hope to begin their degree and are often required to audition on a primary instrument or in voice. Programs generally award either a Bachelor of Music or Bachelor of Arts degree at the end of four years, and students may specialize in a discipline (performance, composition, music education, etc.) that they hope to pursue a career in or as preparation for further study.

Key Terms

Major

A major is your primary focus of study in a university degree. Most of your courses will be focused on your major subject, and usually your degree will state what you majored in. In music, this is often a phrase used to describe your area of focus (e.g. education, composition, performance) within your program.

Minor

A minor is an optional, secondary focus of study in a university degree. Taking a minor is a choice, and schools will usually give both a minimum number and a recommended list of courses a student can take to fulfill a minor. Your degree will also state your minor. It's a great way to explore another subject you are interested in outside of your major (such as science, French or business)!

What is a Bachelor of Music Degree?

A Bachelor of Music (BMus) degree is one of the most common degrees offered in music. You study music as your primary focus and usually specialize into different disciplines or majors later in the degree. BMus programs generally require an audition and last four years. Most BMus programs include private one-on-one lessons in your instrument or voice, culminating in a final juried performance at the end of the school year. Students are usually required to play in an ensemble, study history and theory, and take aural skills classes in ear training and sight-singing. All of these courses are designed to improve your musicianship and your understanding of how music works and how it fits into the world around us. At the end of the four years, you will be prepared for a career in music, as well as having developed useful skills for other careers. You can also choose to pursue further education in music or in fields like law or medicine.

What is a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Music?

A Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in Music is a four-year program in which you major in music. These programs often focus on music as a liberal arts discipline, looking at history, culture and analysis over performance and creation. Some are very similar to BMus programs. They often do not require an audition and some students who audition for BMus programs may be offered a placement in a BA in music, depending on the school. Most do not provide private one-on-one lessons, though some schools may offer this through an audition. Playing in an ensemble is also an option, but usually requires passing the same ensemble audition BMus students are required to perform (see below for information on auditions).

Note that some BA or Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA) programs in music are functionally identical to BMus programs, including private lessons and ensemble playing. This depends on the school and which Faculty is awarding the degree; usually schools who offer this kind of BA do not offer a BMus.

Key Terms

Music Theory

Students analyze music to understand how different musical elements combine and interact to create the styles and sounds of the music they listen to. Students usually learn the fundamentals of harmony in Western classical music, jazz or popular music. In upper years, students go on to study more specific eras and styles. They may also study composers and their approaches to composition through a theoretical lens.

Music History

Students study music from the past to the present to better understand the contexts in which different styles developed, pieces were written, and composers worked. Courses are usually divided by eras which align with specific periods of history. Students usually learn the history of Western classical music, jazz or popular music. In upper years, they will go on to study more specific eras, genres or composers and their approaches to composition through a historical lens.

Musical Skills

Also known as aural skills, these courses involve sight-singing and ear training. Musical skills courses develop students' abilities to identify intervals, chords, chord progressions and melodies by ear, and transcribe them. They also develop a student's ability to learn and sing simple melodies, either by sight or by ear, and occasionally also teach collaborative or improvisational skills.

Private Instruction/Lessons

Music programs often offer private, one-to-one instruction on the instrument they audition on, referred to as their primary instrument, or in voice. These lessons go throughout the full school year and students usually are required to perform for a small panel of instructors (sometimes called a jury) during final exams. These performances often include repertoire, studies and technique, though requirements vary between instruments. Students focusing on performance are often required to perform public recitals in third and fourth year. Some schools offer the performance of a recital as its own course.

Ensemble Courses

Playing in an ensemble with other music students (usually conducted or directed by an instructor) is often a requirement in music programs. They rehearse during the school week and have performances throughout the year, and students are enrolled in a course for which they receive a grade. Students will be limited by which instruments they play - saxophones, for instance, cannot perform in a string orchestra - and are slotted into different ensembles based on their playing or singing ability demonstrated through an ensemble audition (see “Ensemble Audition”). Students studying instruments such as guitar or piano are usually required to perform in an ensemble, often a choir. Sometimes, they may substitute performing in a chamber music group as their ensemble credit.

Auditions, Theory and Piano, Oh My!

In addition to applying through a service like OUAC, most programs require you to audition and some require a theory assessment. These are administered by the university and, though they differ from school to school, they are often more similar than not. Schools often also ask for information about your musical background and career goals, and auditions may be followed by a short interview.

Auditions

Most schools require an audition for admission, which are conducted between January and April. In many programs, these auditions are on a classical instrument and students must perform two pieces of contrasting repertoire that highlights their level of musical ability. Auditions may include these pieces, etudes or technique and will often test your sight-reading and ear training capacity. They are often followed by a short interview for your panel to get to know you, and for you to ask questions about the program!

Different instruments have different requirements, so check each school for the specifics, though these usually overlap between schools. As such, you can prepare a small selection of pieces and use them at most schools, which reduces your workload! Students hoping to enter directly into a Performance degree are often expected to perform at a higher level. You may also audition for multiple instruments or streams (i.e. jazz and classical). **There is almost always a fee for auditioning, charged by each school individually.**

Pro Tip!

A lot of programs offer trial lessons with teachers and this is a great opportunity to see where you can improve before you audition, learn about the process and get an idea of what studying with them will be like!

One-on-one lessons are a big part of your time at university, and finding someone you can work well with is vital!

Piano Auditions

Piano applicants are often expected to perform music at a higher level, likely due to the high number of applicants, as piano is a very common instrument for students to take music lessons in. Some schools have additional requirements as well.

Jazz and Popular Music

Students auditioning in jazz or popular music usually have very different requirements, usually outlined in their program page. These often include a demonstration of a variety of songs which showcase their ability to play or sing, with specific style guidelines or repertoire lists provided by the school. Improvisation is usually a requirement of jazz programs and may be part of popular music auditions. These auditions sometimes require submission of a pre-screening video audition and will be asked to audition in person after review of this video. For popular music programs you might have to submit a demo in addition to, or instead of, auditioning.

Accompanists

Most schools require students to have accompaniment of some sort for the music they perform. Accompanists are sometimes provided by the school, but you may have to hire one and as such are another potential expense. Some pop and jazz programs may allow backing tracks, often for pre-screening video submissions.

Pro Tip!

If you have a private teacher, lean on their expertise for what repertoire is appropriate for the programs you want to apply to and get in touch with the school if you have any questions! Private lessons are not a requirement for admission, but are often beneficial.

Ensemble Auditions

Most music programs require students to play in an ensemble and usually require that they audition into that ensemble. These are usually done at the beginning of the school year and might require students to prepare instrumental excerpts (given by the school) or songs to sing or play. *These are not a requirement for admission into a program.* Students in programs which do not require performance (such as some BAs) may permit students to audition for ensembles if they wish.

Theory

Some schools require a music theory assessment as part of the admission process, though they may offer an exemption from the assessment if you can provide evidence of prior study in theory, such as an RCM exam. Some schools have a following placement exam at the beginning of the year, which impacts the theory course you take in your first year. Jazz theory assessments deal with jazz-specific material and concepts, such as jazz standard songs and improvisation.

Piano Proficiency

Some schools require students who sing or play other instruments to have a certain level of facility in piano in order to graduate. If they do, it's usually at an RCM Level 6 level. Some merely recommend a lower level of proficiency, in order to succeed in courses that benefit from having an understanding of piano. If you do not have RCM Level 6, schools will offer an equivalency exam, often with a preceding prep course that develops your skill to the necessary level. Those who have completed RCM Level 6 or above are exempt once they provide proof to the school.

Piano majors are exempt from this requirement and are not required to have Level 6 proficiency in another instrument.

Questionnaires and Other Get-to-Know-You

Often, schools ask students to give them supplementary information, such as RCM exam certificates and references. Additionally, they might ask for information about your musical or academic background, your interests, if you are interested in applying to more than one program and occasionally for an admissions essay. These are usually sent out online and take the form of a questionnaire or package you submit to the school. You may be required to pay your audition fee as part of filling out this questionnaire and submit your intended repertoire for the audition.

*Note that participation in the RCM Certificate program certification in your instrument is **not** a requirement of admission to university music programs. Because the curricula in the RCM Certificate program are standardized, schools have historically used them as reference points for the level of material they require in their own auditions. You do not need to complete **any** RCM exams prior to auditioning into university, though schools may recommend it to familiarize yourself with repertoire or theory material at the necessary level. This can be done without participating in exams.*

Make Your Degree Your Own

BMus programs often offer the option to enter into a variety of specializations (sometimes called concentrations or majors) in upper years, though some offer (or even require) students to enter into these in first year. Some of these have additional requirements for admission. Almost all require students to take core courses in theory, history and skills in first and second year, to provide a solid foundation for all students. All specializations have specific degree requirements, meaning they require students to take a certain selection of courses in order to graduate. Generally, most schools with music programs offer some variation of these specializations.

Comprehensive

Sometimes referred to as self-directed, general or another moniker, comprehensive programs generally have broadly-defined requirements taking from academic and practical courses in music. These flexible requirements allow students to create a program tailored to interests that may not fit within another specialization or to diversify their skillset and build their general knowledge in music.

Composition

Composition programs are centered around creating music, often focusing on contemporary classical music and provide private one-on-one lessons in composition to students who enter into the program. Students can take courses on practical skills (such as electroacoustic music, arranging and improvisation) and in theory and history to supplement their knowledge and expand their musical horizons. Opportunities for student works to be performed occur throughout the year and may include readings from large ensembles at the school. Some programs may offer the opportunity to include a portfolio of compositions with your application and some require it to enter directly into Composition in your first year.

Music Education

Music education programs are often directed towards students interested in becoming classroom music teachers, though they often offer courses and skills relevant to community educators and private teachers. Students will take courses on education techniques and philosophies, are often required to learn the basics of playing and teaching other instruments, and learn to conduct. Schools with teachers' colleges may offer direct admission into their Bachelor of Education (BEd) program to qualify as a teacher or offer Concurrent Education courses to complete both a BMus/BA and a BEd in five years.

Music Theory and History

These programs are tailored towards students interested in the analysis of music, the study of its history or other academic topics in music. Programs have requirements which focus heavily on academic skills, though students are usually able to continue developing their performance skills through lessons and in ensembles. Different schools take differing approaches to how their program requirements are designed, some completely separating theory and history, and others offering a general, research-oriented program in which students are able to pursue their individual interests. Generally, upper year students are required to take theory, history and other academic courses, and may have the opportunity to pursue an individual research project with supervision from a faculty member.

Performance

Performance degrees are targeted at students who are interested in pursuing a high degree of skill in an instrument or in singing, and often offer longer lessons than other specializations to facilitate this. They may also encourage performing in a chamber ensemble and have first access to slots in such groups. They are usually required, in upper years, to perform recitals at the school and may be further encouraged to participate in competitions to perform concertos and similar works offered by the school to all its students. Some schools have the opportunity to audition directly into performance for their first year, in which case students should be prepared to perform at an advanced level, defined by the school, at their audition.

Other Specializations

Many schools offer different kinds of specializations outside of these, or non-classical streams that can lead into these specializations. Check out some examples below!

Popular Music

Some schools offer popular music programs, which may lead into specialties in music production, songwriting or overlap with the programming open to classical music students. Playing popular music might be an option for programs with more diverse audition requirements and students might focus on ensemble playing rather than taking one-on-one lessons. *Note that programs specifically on music production tend to be offered in collaboration with colleges or other departments at a university. More information can be found in our other guides.*

Jazz

Some schools offer the option of studying jazz rather than classical music. They might offer the opportunity to pursue degrees in jazz performance, as well as music education, jazz composition or other kinds of music creation, and comprehensive specializations.

Music Therapy

Music therapists use music to support health, development and well-being within therapeutic relationships between themselves and their clients. They work in a variety of clinical settings, including hospitals, long term care centres and in correctional facilities. These programs usually feature a strong psychology requirement and usually prepare students for board certification in music therapy. The Canadian Association of Music Therapists (CAMT) recognizes a [select number of programs](#), but many schools offer courses or entire specializations in the field.

Double Degrees or Majors

Do you want to pursue something other than music (like science) or study two specific different disciplines in music (like education and performance)? You're in luck! Most schools have options to create a double-degree program with music and another subject, though the specifics vary wildly, so look at our guides or contact the school for more information. Some programs offer combined Bachelor of Arts (or similar) degrees, which do allow students to complete a major in music and another in four years, but otherwise it will likely take longer. If you want to do a double major in music, those options are also often available.

Thank you for reading our guide! Check out our other guides for more specialized looks at different kinds of programs, comparisons between schools, and guides for individual schools.

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