

# MUSIC THEORY: WHAT TO EXPECT



You may have seen a popular meme that compares the study of music theory to the study of rocket science.

It's funny and true on one level: the content of both seems like a foreign language to outsiders, but actually represents basic material for students of each discipline.



The study of music theory is an integral part of any music program and NIU is no exception. Music majors complete four semesters of music theory and aural skills. These core courses help students to understand how music works: to see the music you hear and hear the music you see.

Music theory is the "how and why" of music; it involves learning the vocabulary and elements of music and how to apply them to gain a deeper understanding of musical tendencies and structure. Topics of study begin with fundamentals (key signatures, scales, intervals, etc.) and quickly progress to more advanced, analytic concepts (harmony, figured bass, part-writing, form, etc.).

• *Before classes begin, you can prepare best by acquiring a solid understanding and familiarity with the fundamentals category mentioned above.*

Aural skills involves learning how to identify and understand musical elements by ear. Many of the concepts in music theory are reinforced from an aural perspective. One of the tools used in aural skills is solmization (assigning

syllables to each note of a scale to sing; e.g. do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do for a major scale). We use a "moveable-do" system, which means do is always do, no matter what key or mode (major, minor, or other).

- *Before classes begin, you can prepare best by familiarizing yourself with moveable-do solmization and sharpening your singing abilities.*

# RESOURCES FOR PREPARATION

There are many ways to prepare for the four-semester core classes in theory and aural skills:

- summer music camps
- choral participation
- high school or community college music theory courses
- ask your music teacher for basic theory instruction
- familiarize yourself with a piano keyboard.

You may want to explore the textbook we use for all semesters of music theory (*The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*, 4th ed. Norton, 2021), paying close attention to the contents of the first several chapters:

<https://wnorton.com/books/9780393442403/overview>

*There are plenty of online resources to learn and test yourself on theory fundamentals; the following are recommended:*

<http://www.musictheory.net>

*Very good explanations and practice exercises, especially for fundamentals.*

<https://www.teoria.com/>

*Also good fundamentals and exercises.*

For aural skills, the Teoria site above has helpful sight-singing practice exercises. For learning solmization, the following site offers a good introduction, however it explains both moveable-do and fixed-do; we use moveable-do with do-based minor:

<https://www.musical-u.com/learn/solfege-do-re-mi-isnt-childs-play/>

If you have any questions please feel free to contact me.

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