

# American Music History & Listening

## Administrator Overview

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*Course philosophy, structure, and assessment model*

Created by Justin Berchtold

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# Course at a Glance

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<b>Course Title</b>	American Music History & Listening
<b>Grade Level</b>	9–12
<b>Length</b>	Full Year (8 units, ~4 weeks each)
<b>Prerequisite</b>	None
<b>Materials</b>	Audio playback, paper or digital response sheets
<b>Created by</b>	Justin Berchtold

American Music History & Listening is a year-long elective that teaches students how to listen to music with purpose and precision. It is not a survey of music trivia organized by dates. It is a skills course that uses American music history as the material for building real listening ability.

Students learn to describe what they hear, analyze how musical features affect meaning, connect music to its historical context, and evaluate music using evidence-based criteria rather than personal taste.

## Course Philosophy

Most music appreciation courses ask students to memorize names, dates, and genres. This course takes a different approach: it treats listening as a trainable skill. Every unit builds on the previous one, and every assignment asks students to support their claims with evidence from the sound itself.

The course is designed around three principles:

- **Skills before facts.** Students learn how to listen before they learn what to know.
- **Evidence from the sound.** Every response requires specific musical details, not opinions.
- **Phased complexity.** New skills are introduced gradually so students are never assessed on something they have not practiced.

The result is a course where students finish the year able to hear music more clearly, explain what they hear, and connect sound to the world around it.

# The Listening Framework

The course uses a four-level listening framework called D-A-C-E, with Interpret woven throughout:

**Describe** — Name specific musical features: tempo, instrumentation, dynamics, texture, melody, rhythm.

**Analyze** — Explain how those features affect the mood, energy, or meaning of the music.

**Contextualize** — Connect the music to its time, place, audience, or purpose.

**Evaluate** — Make a judgment using a clear criterion, not just personal preference.

These skills phase in across the year. Students are never assessed on a skill they have not yet practiced:

Units	Skills Assessed	Not Yet Scored
1–2	Describe, Analyze, Interpret	Context, Evaluation
3–5	Describe, Analyze, Interpret, Contextualize	Evaluation
6–8	All skills including Evaluate and Cross-Era Comparison	—

This phased approach prevents a common problem in music courses: overwhelming students with too many criteria before they have the vocabulary to use them. By the end of the year, students can handle all four levels simultaneously.

## Unit Sequence

Unit	Title	Focus	Project
1	How We Listen	Building listening vocabulary	Listening Methods Check
2	Foundations	Early American musical roots	Roots Map Exhibit
3	19th Century Roots	Music in social settings	Seminar + Evidence Response
4	1900–1930	Blues, jazz, early pop	1920s Radio Show
5	1930–1950	Swing, bebop, early R&B	Industry vs. Innovation Debate
6	1950–1969	Rock, soul, protest	Curated Playlist + Liner Notes
7	1970–1989	Genre explosion	Genre Jigsaw Exhibit
8	1990–Today	Digital era, global flows	Portfolio + Capstone

# Assessment Structure

Assessment in this course is built around three consistent categories that repeat every unit:

- **Weekly listening responses** — Short written responses (4–6 sentences) to listening excerpts. Teachers fully score one response per week.
- **Unit project** — A structured project that asks students to apply listening skills to a specific task. Projects vary in format (written, visual, spoken, group) but all require evidence from the music.
- **Unit listening check** — A brief individual assessment where students respond to an excerpt they have not heard before, using the skills practiced in that unit.

## Grading Dimensions

Every response and project is assessed across four dimensions. Not all dimensions are scored in every unit — they phase in as skills are introduced:

- **Listening accuracy** — Does the student name real musical details?
- **Evidence use** — Does the student connect those details to an effect or meaning?
- **Interpretation** — Does the student offer a supported claim about the music?
- **Context / Evaluation** — Does the student connect to setting, era, or a judgment criterion? (Phased in starting Unit 3 and Unit 6.)

*This approach avoids rubric bloat. Teachers can grade a typical listening response in under two minutes while still providing meaningful feedback.*

## Project Overview

Each unit culminates in a structured project. Projects are designed to be practical for large class sizes: most can be graded from a one-page product, a short script, a single slide, or a brief recording.

### 1. Listening Methods Check

Individual. Students respond to two contrasting excerpts, demonstrating basic listening vocabulary.

### 2. Roots Map Exhibit

Group. Students compare three early American musical traditions and create a visual map of shared traits.

### **3. Seminar + Evidence Response**

Individual + class. Students prepare for and participate in a structured discussion, then write an evidence-based paragraph.

### **4. 1920s Radio Show**

Group. Students create a short radio-style script introducing three excerpts with sound details and context.

### **5. Industry vs. Innovation Debate**

Group. Students debate whether industry pressures or musical innovation had a greater effect on the sound.

### **6. Curated Playlist + Liner Notes**

Individual. Students build a themed 4-song playlist with liner notes including listening evidence, interpretation, and evaluation.

### **7. Genre Jigsaw Exhibit**

Group. Students become experts on one scene or genre and teach it to the class through a gallery walk.

### **8. Portfolio + Capstone**

Individual. Students compile revised work and write a new cross-era analysis demonstrating year-long growth.

# Why This Course Works

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## Designed for Real Classrooms

This course was built by a working teacher who understands the reality of large class loads, limited prep time, and mixed student motivation. Every design decision reflects that reality:

- **Manageable grading.** Most written work is 4–6 sentences. Teachers fully score one response per week plus the unit project. No 30-page research papers.
- **Low material requirements.** The course needs audio playback and paper. Slides and technology are helpful but not required.
- **Consistent structure.** Every unit follows the same format: overview, excerpts, weekly plans, daily lessons, prompts, project, grading guidance. Teachers know where to find everything.
- **Flexible pacing.** Units are designed for approximately four weeks each but can be shortened or extended. Teachers can substitute listening excerpts without breaking the progression.
- **Varied project formats.** Students write, speak, design, and collaborate across the eight projects. No single format dominates the year.

## Builds Transferable Skills

The listening skills in this course transfer beyond music class. Students practice close observation, evidence-based argument, structured discussion, and analytical writing. These are skills that benefit students across disciplines.

## Supports Diverse Learners

The course does not require prior musical training or instrument experience. It meets students where they are and builds skill progressively. The listening framework gives all students a shared vocabulary and a clear path forward, regardless of their musical background.

## Standards Alignment

The course aligns with National Core Arts Standards for Music, particularly in the responding strand (Perceive, Analyze, Interpret, Evaluate). The phased skill progression maps directly to these standards while keeping instruction practical and student-centered.

# Course Materials

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The complete curriculum package includes three documents:

- **Teacher Edition** (60+ pages) — Complete course with daily lessons, listening excerpts, student prompts, projects, sample responses, grading guidance, and teacher tips for all eight units.
- **Student Workbook** — Student-facing materials: project directions, listening prompts, response sheets, and reflection pages. Ready to print or distribute digitally.
- **Administrator Overview** (this document) — Course philosophy, framework, assessment structure, and project overview for department chairs and administrators.

A separate Teacher Project Packet with ready-to-copy handouts and scoring forms is also available.

## Implementation Support

The Teacher Edition includes everything needed to teach this course from day one. Each unit contains step-by-step daily lesson plans, so teachers who are new to music appreciation courses can follow the structure directly. Experienced teachers can adapt the materials to their own style while keeping the listening progression intact.

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### About Virtunity

Virtunity is a structured practice platform built by a band director for band directors. It helps students build fundamentals—time, rhythm, pitch—through guided daily practice, so teachers can spend lesson time on phrasing, expression, and artistry.

This curriculum was developed alongside Virtunity's mission: give teachers practical tools that support the work already happening in music classrooms.

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