Dear CCRMA faculty,

In my capacity as CCRMA graduate student representative, I wanted to communicate some questions and concerns that were raised in several conversations I have had with the graduate student body, including two meetings, one on April 6, 2020, and another on April 24th, 2020. They revolve around five general themes: the preparation for qualifying exams; the PhD program’s overall balance between specialized and general area knowledge; the ability to take specialized coursework in preparation for the dissertation proposal defense; the feasibility of defending the dissertation given the prior degree timeline; and the availability of advanced coursework in some specific domains.

This is a brief summary of the overarching topics that were discussed.

* **Qualifying exams:** Many PhD students expressed concerns about the process of preparing for the qualifying exam. In particular, students reported a mismatch between the content covered by the core CCRMA courses and the content on the exam that has widened over the years, as course syllabi have evolved. Previous generations of graduate students have handled this gap by creating a file of study materials that is passed from cohort to cohort. There is widespread concern within the PhD student body that this approach is not sustainable, given the informal nature of the process and high likelihood of information being lost or unintentionally altered from one year to the next, and an equally widespread preference for a more clearly-delineated, faculty-guided structure.
* **Specialization vs generalization:** There was some discussion and dialogue about the degree to which the PhD and MAMST programs aim to prepare people to be specialists versus preparing students to have a general base of knowledge in music-related research and scholarship. Several students requested clarity on this balance, as well as how specific courses in the CCRMA curriculum contributed to it.
* **Special area exam and dissertation proposal defense:** Several students said that given the concentration of required general coursework in the first year, it was difficult to acquire the requisite specialized knowledge to successfully write and defend a dissertation proposal up to their standards on time. This concern was related to questions about the balance between specialization and generalization. A few students felt the timing was manageable, but required a very systematic approach to coursework during the first three years of the degree.
* **Time taken to graduate:** Many students expressed concern over the frequency with which PhD students take longer than the five years with guaranteed funding to graduate. One possible factor that was mentioned as contributing to this trend is the turnaround between defending the dissertation proposal and defending the dissertation itself. Another possible factor was the balance of coursework between independent studies and project-oriented classes resulting in variable amounts of dissertation-related research during the early years of the degree.
* **Availability of advanced coursework:** In the meeting on April 6, several students wondered why several popular areas of research, most notably physical interaction design, are not more fully represented in CCRMA’s course catalogue. Although classes in individual skills associated with these areas are offered outside CCRMA, some students expressed a desire for more direct guidance from inside the program. In addition, several students expressed concerns about the number of existing graduate-level courses, especially core required courses for both the PhD and MAMST degrees, that include early-career undergraduates. Students who raised these concerns felt that such a broad range of expertise prevented instructors from covering as much advanced material in favor of emphasizing comparatively introductory concepts.

I hope that there can be some dialogue between faculty and students regarding these topics, especially in the context of ongoing processes such as the curriculum review.

Sincerely,

-Noah Fram