



Georgia Music Teachers Association

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS about MUSIC THEORY

Diane Boyd, GMTA Theory Chair

While serving as GMTA's Theory Chair, I have fielded dozens of music theory questions from GMTA members as they prepared their students to take the GMTA Theory Tests or the relatively-new Georgia Auditions Theory Exams (GATEs). Like any discipline that has evolved over centuries, the study of music theory includes concepts whose meanings are settled as well as concepts whose meanings are vigorously debated.

Since some of the debated concepts in music theory are core concepts, we can't just leave them out of the curriculum. Whenever the curriculum "chooses" a side or limits a definition to specific instances, it has been done for the purposes of testing and is not meant to devalue other viewpoints. Instead, use those to spark a conversation and a more robust exploration of a concept.

This FAQ will be updated from time to time with questions members have asked, and I will attempt to provide answers that further clarify GMTA's theory curricula so that members can prepare their students with greater confidence. If you have a curriculum-related music theory question that you'd like to see answered here, please email me at [dianelboyd@comcast.net](mailto:dianelboyd@comcast.net).

And now for the first topic...stem direction.

### **STEM DIRECTION: What is the "rule for stems"?**

Despite handwritten manuscripts that show composers often prefer whatever is the fastest way to get notes on the paper, there are in fact a set of "rules" that have developed for publishers/engravers to follow that standardize what we see in printed music. The basic rule is as follows:

*For notes that are on or above the middle line of a staff, the stems go down and are placed to the left of the note head. For notes that are below the middle line, the stems go up and are placed on the right side of the note head.*

I tell my students that the middle line is a magnet, pulling stems towards it, but when a note is on the middle line, gravity takes over. I have also taught students to think of the word "honor" as a mnemonic device for "on or above", which connects the stem direction of notes on the middle line with the direction of stems for notes above the line.

I have collected 13 resources that state the rule for stems, ranging from beginning method books to college textbooks, and I have uploaded them to GMTA's website in a single PDF file (Stem Direction - Resources.pdf). You will notice that the more advanced resources introduce the larger concept that stem direction of any particular note actually depends on the notes that come before and after. There is some art to the decision, and as with any rule, there are many exceptions. The GMTA theory curricula limit testing to individual note heads without context, which is easier to test. Nearly every score contains subjective decisions that "break" the rule, but for good reason. If you want to learn more about how engravers make those decisions, Giese & Edmunson's *Guidelines for Manuscript Preparation*.