

The KITS Music Theory Program: A Brief History

The Keynote Independent Theory Service, known as KITS, was founded in 1985 by Christine A. Murow, a piano teacher, composer, and former theory chairman for the Maryland State Music Teachers Association. A 1967 alumna of Susquehanna University, Mrs. Murow first conceived of KITS in the early 80's while serving the MSMTA in its large and far-flung theory program. To bring the yearly exams to more county chapters throughout Maryland, she had the idea of a test kit, containing all the needed supplies, that could be sent to county chairmen. Upon stepping down as state chairman, she took the opportunity to write her own theory curriculum and to launch an examination program, using the "test kit" concept, for individual teachers and other local or state associations nationwide. A unique idea in music education, KITS serves music teachers by providing a well-organized music theory curriculum at the elementary and secondary levels, along with student workbooks, and annual examinations. KITS also sponsors the National Music Theory Honor Roll.

In 1990, the acquisition of a computer facilitated the production and publication not only of the exams but student workbooks as well, not to mention the ongoing sponsorship of the growing National Honor Roll. Eventually there were workbooks available on all seven curricular levels, plus supplemental workbooks for the upper four levels. By 2001, exam participation topped 1400, and the Honor Roll was listing more than 500 students each year.

KITS in the 21st Century

In 2018, with an archive of 35 different editions of the music theory examinations, each with an exam for each of the seven levels of the program, KITS began the sequential reissue of the tests. The prior year, 2017, brought the publication of all eleven student workbooks online. Some years later, *The KITS Music Theory Curriculum* followed. Christine Murow had been Director of the service for almost forty years when she thought to solicit a successor. In 2023, she was gratified to receive a letter from Dr. Sonja Mihelcic, Founder and CEO of the Naperville Music Academy in Aurora IL. Dr. Mihelcic, also a KITS subscriber, offered to step in as the new Director of KITS; an amicable agreement was reached, and she took over beginning in the exam season of spring 2024. With her experience and leadership comes more digital accessibility, including an interactive website, meaning greater convenience for busy teachers, especially the younger generation.

The Annual Exams

Every March a new test is published for each level of the curriculum. The written part of each exam covers the Reading and Vocabulary requirements. A Listening section tests aural perception, with the teacher playing from a Teachers Guide; and the Playing test is scored by the teacher on a keyboard scoring form on the back page of each exam, starting with a number of points and deducting for note or fingering errors. (An Applied Skills form is also available for teachers of instruments other than piano; the scales and chords may also be sung.) Each exam has 100 points, plus a two-point Bonus Question, for a total of 102 points. A score of 90 or better qualifies a student for the Honor Roll.

Teachers receive a TEST KIT including all test materials: examination papers, keyboard scoring forms, listening guides, answer keys, and certificates. Fees are given on the Test Kit order form, which can be submitted on the website, by email, or printed and mailed. The exams are available only until September 1 each year. The idea of having a new edition every year is to minimize the practice of “teaching to the test.” By limiting the availability of the exams, teachers and students have a fresh challenge every year.

Teachers have the flexibility to use the exams as suits their own circumstances and schedule. While teachers also determine the placement of students, Primary level is typically given in the second grade, with Step 6, the highest level, aimed at the high school senior. But students begin music at different ages, and so may be entered at whatever level the teacher feels will yield success. The KITS workbooks, comprehensive on the subject of music theory, remain the best preparation for students taking the annual KITS exams.

The National Music Theory Honor Roll

A motivational aspect of the KITS program is the National Honor Roll, offering incentive for teachers and students to earn recognition for their achievement in music theory. The Honor Roll lists students who score 90 or better on the annual exams. Participating teachers register their honorees following the test and receive a supply of gold Honor Roll seals to be awarded students on their certificates. Registration for the Honor Roll requires the teacher’s signature, declaring the eligibility of honorees and attesting that the test was given under *supervised testing conditions*. The Honor Roll Registration form, like the Test Kit order form, is on the website, and can also be submitted on the website, by email, or printed and mailed.

Special awards given by the National Honor Roll allow teachers and students to set long-term goals in their music studies. For example, students listed on the Honor Roll for five years receive the 5-Year Medal. Those listed on all seven levels of the curriculum are awarded the 7-Step Trophy. Both of these awards are personalized with the student's name. Further insuring that students stay with music for the long haul, qualifications for the trophy include an age restriction: the student must make the Honor Roll on the Primary level before turning 13. Since the inception of the Honor Roll in 1986, an average of 40 percent of exam participants have been listed each year.