Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a first-year PhD student in Dr. Jessica Grahn’s and Dr. Adrian Owen’s labs, and I am approaching you to ask if you would be a part of my comprehensive examination committee. I would like to complete the exam in the late spring/early summer 2017.

To give you a little bit of background information, my doctoral work will characterize the effects of music on cognitive functioning. Specifically, I will conduct a series of experiments during which participants will complete cognitive tasks while listening to music. Unlike previous studies, I will test multiple cognitive abilities within the same testing session and will improve upon previous research by systematically examining how particular characteristics of music (e.g. familiarity, mood, lexical content) affect different cognitive processes.

~~A key component of my doctoral research is to collect EEG data while participants complete a variety of cognitive tasks. I will use analyses that investigate the degree of neural entrainment to music to determine whether there is a relationship between neural entrainment and cognitive task performance. This novel approach will allow me to examine questions that cannot be answered with standard behavioural techniques, such as how neural oscillations are involved in the processing of background music and how different cognitive processes are affected.~~

Since the 1950s, studies have tried to determine how music affects a person’s ability to complete cognitively demanding tasks. However, synthesizing the results of these past studies reveals two important problems. First, these past studies compared performance on different types of tasks that assess different cognitive processes (e.g. working memory, executive function). Second, the studies used different types of music. To date there is no comprehensive review paper that summarizes the work in this field.

In light of the new comprehensive examination guidelines, I would like to write a review paper on the body of literature regarding the effect of background music on cognitive abilities. The new guidelines state*:*

*The goal of the comprehensive examination is to provide breadth and depth. … If a student’s comprehensive examination does not fulfill both these goals, the advisory committee should have an alternative mechanism in place to provide the required breadth and/or depth through another means, including coursework, independent study, or practicum.*

I understand that writing a review paper will only fulfill the depth component of these requirements. However, I feel that I am gaining breadth in other ways. My master’s work, also completed at Western, required an in-depth understanding of the research about consciousness, brain-computer interfaces, and the field of machine learning. The courses that I am taking this year include a course on the basics of fMRI and a statistics course on mathematical modeling of individual differences. All of this has extended my knowledge into related fields. I also will be required to take two more courses in the coming years and would be happy to discuss the best options for gaining breadth with the comprehensive committee.

I hope to begin writing the review in the winter 2017 term and to complete it by the beginning of the spring 2017 term (April/May).

Thank you