

These music exams

A guide to ABRSM exams for
candidates, teachers and parents

Clara Taylor

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Introduction

At the very heart of ABRSM's work lie three convictions: first, that the journey towards musical accomplishment is of great intrinsic value to those who embark purposefully upon it; secondly, that milestones enable most travellers to travel faster and further; and, thirdly, that ABRSM exams are the best milestones for this particular journey.

There is no need to use this Introduction to argue the first of these propositions. Almost every reader of this booklet will already be convinced of the immense educational benefits, fulfilment and joy which the development of musical skills can generate.

Milestones should not be misused. Reaching the next one is never the ultimate purpose of a journey. Their dual function is to provide an immediate goal and a measure of progress to date; and most of us need both of these at regular intervals to help us on our way. This is true irrespective of our starting point, the length of journey undertaken, or the speed at which we travel.

ABRSM exams have exactly these characteristics and qualities in the context of learning a musical instrument. They are the outcome of long experience and a continuing collaborative and consultative process amongst leading musicians, both teachers and performers, ensuring that each element of musicianship is fully explored and accurately measured at each grade.

ABRSM's graded music exams for individual instruments, singing and theory, as well as diplomas and Music Medals, are accredited by the regulatory authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and are part of the National Qualifications Framework. The Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) includes Grades 6–8 in the tariff for university and college entrance.

The examinations are now undertaken by over 600,000 students throughout the world each year and so provide the international benchmarks for the measurement of musical achievement. We remain deeply conscious of our resultant responsibilities to teachers and candidates and strive to maintain the highest levels of integrity and consistency in our professional work.

These Music Exams, written by ABRSM's former Chief Examiner, Clara Taylor, provides expert practical advice to candidates, teachers and parents and seeks to show ABRSM's professional work in as transparent a way as possible. I commend it to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Guy Perricone". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "G" and a prominent flourish at the end of the name.

Guy Perricone
Chief Executive

Outline plan

Unmarked assessment

Designed for pupils after 6–9 months' tuition.

It can be used to prepare pupils for the graded music exams.

Prep Test

Subjects

Piano

Violin, Viola, Cello,
Double Bass, Guitar

Descant Recorder, Flute, Oboe,
Clarinet, Bassoon, Saxophone

Horn, Trumpet, Cornet,
Flugelhorn, E \flat Horn,
Trombone, Baritone,
Euphonium

Singing

Graded music exams

Candidates may be entered in any grade without previously having taken any other Practical grade

NB *Jazz subjects:
Grades 1–5 only*

*Grade 5 or above in Theory,
Practical Musicianship or solo jazz
subject must be passed before taking
Practical Grades 6 or above*

Grade 1

Subjects

Piano, Jazz Piano, Organ,
Harpsichord

Grade 2

Grade 3

Violin, Viola, Cello,
Double Bass, Guitar, Harp

Grade 4

Recorder, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet,
Jazz Clarinet, Bassoon,
Saxophone, Jazz Sax

Grade 5

Horn, Trumpet, Jazz Trumpet,
Cornet, Flugelhorn, E \flat Horn,
Trombone, Jazz Trombone, Bass
Trombone, Baritone,
Euphonium, Tuba

Grade 6

Grade 7

Percussion, Singing

Grade 8

Theory, Practical Musicianship

Diplomas

*Grade 8 Practical (and, for
Teaching, Grade 6 Theory) or
substitutions must be passed
before taking DipABRSM*

*Each level of diploma or
its substitution must be
passed before proceeding
to the next level*

DipABRSM

Subjects

Music Performance

Music Direction

Instrumental/Vocal Teaching

LRSM

FRSM

Syllabus

Tunes/Basic exercises

Set piece (or song)

Piece (or song) of candidate's own choice

Listening games/Aural tests

This outline plan is intended for general guidance only. Please refer to the current *Examination Information & Regulations* booklet and relevant syllabuses for exact details of all exams.

Other exams

Ensembles:

Primary, Intermediate & Advanced levels

Jazz Ensembles:

Initial, Intermediate & Advanced levels

Choral Singing:

Initial, Intermediate & Advanced levels

Performance Assessment:

A non-graded and unmarked assessment for adults aged 21 or over and those below this age with special needs.

Music Medals:

Assessments for individual instrumental pupils taught as part of a group (initially available in the UK only). Five levels: Copper, Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum.

SyllabusThree set pieces (or songs)
(*Singing Grades 6–8: four songs*)Scales & broken chords/arpeggios
(*Singing: unaccompanied traditional song*)Sight-reading
(*Solo jazz subjects: quick study*)

Aural tests

UK National Qualifications Framework

ABRSM's instrumental, singing and theory graded exams, diploma exams and Music Medals have been accredited at the following levels within the National Qualifications Framework:

ABRSM qualification	NQF level
Music Medals	
Copper	Entry level 3
Bronze, Silver, Gold	1
Platinum	2
Grades	
1–3	1
4 & 5	2
6–8	3
Diplomas	
DipABRSM	4
LRSM	6
FRSM	7

SyllabusSection 1:
Performance
(*Teaching: viva voce demonstration*)Section 2:
Viva voce including written work
(*Teaching: written submission*)Quick study
(*Music Direction: arrangement*)

Foreword



*'Your exam will be at 10.45 on 15 March.
Please attend 10 minutes beforehand.'*

Candidates, teachers and parents will all feel the impact of those words in their own ways and it would be a rare being who did not experience a quiver of anticipation. Whether you are a teacher, parent or candidate, you will find information, guidance and explanation in this booklet, which will help you through the preparation for the exam, the 'big day' itself and also the period just afterwards.

At all stages, it is well worth remembering that whilst nothing focuses all round practice as effectively as an exam, it is the progress made during this preparation period that really matters.

ABRSM has been giving structure and support and setting standards for over a hundred years. During that time much has been tried, tested and consolidated. We use that wealth of experience for the benefit and guidance of the many hundreds of thousands who regularly take the grades, knowing that they are part of the most respected and valued system of music exams in the world.

The mark form written during the exam and the impressive certificate are permanent reminders, but it is the quality of achievement that makes this particular musical journey so valuable for each individual.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Clara Taylor".

Clara Taylor
Chief Examiner (1997–2010)

1 Why take a music exam?

‘Enjoyment through achievement’ is a phrase that sums up our philosophy, and earning an ABRSM certificate is a rewarding experience. If you are working hard to make progress with your music you need some way of recognising your success and reassurance that you are on the right road. This is exactly what music exams offer:

- motivation and inspiration, working from a carefully structured syllabus towards a definite goal
- a measure of personal progress and attainment against internationally recognised benchmarks
- an objective guide to improve your musical skills
- assessment by a respected and independent musician who has been highly trained and is constantly monitored
- sympathetic encouragement
- performance opportunities
- a real sense of achievement

Of course, music exams do not suit everyone and exam syllabuses are not intended to provide a complete curriculum or choice of repertoire to the exclusion of all other music. All performers should explore a wide range of music to stimulate their interest and refresh their outlook.

2 Before the exam

The teacher usually makes the first move in suggesting an exam, and once the pupil has been encouraged to practise hard, and really wants to succeed, the stage is set for the work ahead. Experienced teachers are familiar with the length of time it takes to prepare for each exam and the care needed to ensure that the most appropriate and appealing selection of pieces is presented. The wide choice available in the syllabuses makes it particularly easy to choose a programme well suited to each candidate and so the time spent in preparation will pass enjoyably and productively.

Once the entry has been made, there is a real sense of purpose in the preparation for the big day. Parents are particularly important at this stage in giving continual support, encouragement and praise for regular effort. Sometimes the pressure of a forthcoming exam causes parents to go into 'teacher mode', which is usually not appreciated either by their children or by the teachers themselves. A regular timetable for practice and plenty of praise is much more helpful than extra pressure at home; and a calm, cheerful attitude right up to the start of the exam is of the greatest importance.

Teachers often arrange for their pupils to play to each other before exams come around, giving valuable performance experience. Preparing for exams takes careful planning and an awareness of the importance of including all aspects of the exam in the lessons on a regular basis. It is unfortunate if scales, sight-reading and aural tests are all left to the last minute, with disastrous results for the pupil's confidence.

PREPARATION TIPS

... for candidates

Pieces

- With the help of your teacher, choose pieces that you really like. Practise them slowly at first. Careful preparation at this stage will make the final performance so much better.
- After the initial stages, practise your pieces right through without stopping and get in the habit of going on immediately if you do make a slip. Be brave and play them through to family or friends to help build up your confidence.
- Practise page-turns where these occur and try to memorise the first few bars of the next page to help your confidence. Difficulties with page-turning, however, will not actually affect the mark.
- In most cases you are allowed to photocopy a page of your piece for the exam where it will help to overcome an awkward page-turn (see Page-turns, p. 20). Organise this in advance and practise putting the photocopy in the right position on the music stand.
- If you are a string, wind or singing candidate make sure you are familiar with the accompaniment, particularly the introduction if there is one, and try to find time to rehearse with your accompanist beforehand.

Scale requirements

- Practise scales and arpeggios daily. Practising them should be as routine as cleaning your teeth! They help you build up reliable technique. For wind players they will also help breathing; for string players, bowing control; and for all instrumentalists, in developing general co-ordination.

Sight-reading

- Remember that **keeping going** is the key to a Pass; aim to keep a basic pulse, despite slips on the way, rather than stopping to correct them. Do feel free to try out any part of the test piece in the half-minute allowed before the actual test begins.

Aural tests

There are many painless ways to get in some aural practice between lessons. These might include:

- Listening to as much music as possible on radio or recordings. If you can get to a concert, even better.
- Joining a choir, band, orchestra or chamber group.
- Clapping the rhythm of excerpts of music you don't know before you play them.
- Singing back parts of tunes which you have just heard for the first time, possibly on the radio or TV.
- Singing through the notes of music excerpts or themes you haven't seen before, or indeed of any music you may have in your music case. Singing just a few notes will be helpful, keeping the intervals in mind as you go.

In general, before the exam

- Remember that you don't have to perform the pieces or do any of the other exam sections in syllabus order. Discuss with your teacher which part of the exam or which piece you should start with to make you feel most confident.
- Don't leave any of your practice to the last minute!
- Remember to let your teacher know of any holidays or school trips that might be coming up, so you can plan your music exam work around them.
- Candidates performing with an accompanist: discuss with your teacher where to stand or sit so that your accompanist can see you clearly, and so you are playing towards the 'audience', your examiner. If this presents a problem on the day, the examiner will help you find a suitable place.

. . . mainly for teachers

- Check all the requirements in the current syllabus, as details can change from time to time. Get hold of a copy of the current *Examination Information & Regulations* booklet too, and check the Syllabus Updates on the inside front cover.
- Choose suitable pieces for the candidate and make sure you have selected the right combination of pieces from the correct syllabus.
- Try to incorporate at least a few minutes' aural training and sight-reading into every lesson. Leaving them to the last minute will not help the pupil's confidence or the marks achieved.
- Give a mock exam to the candidate well before the actual event, and don't forget to include walking into the room and setting up to perform, as these are often the most unsettling moments before the actual exam.
- Encourage the pupil to perform the pieces to a friendly audience (family, relatives and friends) or perhaps hold your own exam candidates' concert a couple of weeks before the exam.
- Theory exams: it is a good idea for candidates to work through sample papers before the exam so that they get used to the sort of questions and to the time limit. It is important that each question is carefully read and checked as some contain more than one part.
- Remind the pupil of how long there is to go before the exam date and plan out the work for the weeks ahead. Don't forget to take into account holidays and school pressures so there is no last-minute panic.
- Encourage pupils to experience all sorts of musical activity by playing in orchestras or chamber groups, singing in choirs and listening to a wide range of music. A trip to a live concert, particularly involving a piece by a composer they know, can really motivate them.

. . . for both teachers and parents

- Try to view the exam as a signpost of a pupil's progress, not a competitive target. There is no need for pupils to go straight on to the next grade – it is essential that they enjoy performing a wide variety of different styles of music without the continual pressure of an approaching exam.
- Speed of development will vary from pupil to pupil, and results may not be as good as expected unless sufficient time is allowed between exams to develop musical and technical skills, and to gain the necessary maturity involved in playing the more advanced pieces.
- It can help enormously if the parents speak to the teacher, read the pupil's notebook and understand what is being asked of the pupil each week. The greatest support is helping the pupil find time to do some uninterrupted practice each day, preferably when the pupil is not tired, and giving lots of praise for practice achieved, regardless of how it sounds. It is the teacher's responsibility to make musical correction and not the parents'!

HELPFUL HINTS A–Z

Access

ABRSM is pleased to make its exams accessible to all candidates, regardless of physical, sensory or learning difficulties. There is a range of alternative tests and formats and we publish a set of guidelines for candidates with particular access needs. Where the guidelines are not applicable, or a candidate has particular physical access needs, each case is considered individually. The guidelines give full details of special tests, entry form codes, extra time and all other provisions, and are available from the Chief Examiner's office or from our website.

Examiners assess every candidate according to the standard expected for the grade. This does not change for candidates with access needs; rather the administration or format of the tests may be altered, to enable the candidate to access the exam.

Candidates who remain unable to access the exam may be eligible for the Performance Assessment. Although this assessment is mainly intended for adults, it is also open to candidates of any age whose particular needs mean that they are unable to access our graded exams, and are able to perform a short programme of pieces entirely of their own choice, lasting no more than 15 minutes.

Accompanists

Instrumental and singing candidates can be enormously helped by a skilful accompanist and, conversely, can be unable to give of their best with an inadequate partner. It is obviously wise to ensure that the best person available is secured right through the grades and especially for the demanding repertoire at the higher levels. During rehearsals the teacher should ensure that the accompanist knows the tempo required and will not overpower the solo line, an all too frequent and distressing occurrence in exams. In cases of difficulty with the accompaniment, the examiner will listen with great attention to the solo line and mark it on its own merits, but inevitably the impact on the overall performance will still be felt.

The teacher or candidate is responsible for providing the accompanist on the day of the exam. The examiner will be concentrating on the job of assessing the candidate and writing remarks on the mark form,

and so cannot and will not act as accompanist. (The exception is the Prep Test, where the examiner will be happy to play the accompaniment, if requested.) On those rare occasions where a candidate arrives without any form of accompaniment, and it is not possible to rearrange the exam at a later time, the examiner will normally offer to hear the candidate unaccompanied.

Age limits

All exams (except the diplomas in Teaching) are open to candidates of all ages. Age is not taken into account in the exam and it is quite usual for adults to take Grade 1 and occasionally for very young children to successfully accomplish the higher grades.

As far as the Prep Test is concerned, it is always a pleasure when an adult comes into the exam room to take this preliminary test. The examiner will appreciate the motivation that lies behind the appearance of these candidates and the 10 minutes will probably stay in both the candidate's and the examiner's mind as one of the high points of the day.

Aural tests

The purpose of aural tests is to establish the link between listening to music and playing music. Most candidates find that their aural abilities improve with regular practice and that they gain confidence when aural training forms part of every lesson. The speed and accuracy with which candidates respond to the aural tests can tell the examiner a lot about the candidate's musical make-up and help to form an overall picture of the candidate's abilities.

Date of exams

Understandably teachers often have a preference for particular exam dates. Unfortunately it is not always possible to accommodate every wish, and teachers will understand the need to be as flexible as possible about this, making sure that their candidates are fully prepared for their exams by the first date of the session. In very exceptional circumstances it may be possible to arrange a change of date if ABRSM is advised early enough. In the UK the Special Visits scheme exists to give teachers the option of choosing a specific date outside the main exam period for the start of the exams at a venue of

their choice, as long as there are at least three hours' examining work. Teachers may of course join together to make up this amount of time. Another advantage of this scheme is that pupils will be familiar with the piano and the surroundings. Similar schemes are being developed in some of our international centres.

Editions of music

Any edition, in or out of print or downloadable, of a set piece can be used (apart from when a particular arrangement or transcription is indicated in the syllabus). The editions listed in the syllabus booklets are the ones our selectors felt most suitable for exam use. They have been checked for availability, but it's not compulsory to use them if you have access to another edition instead.

Remember that photocopying copyright music editions is illegal, except for very specific reasons such as page turns (see p. 20). ABRSM supports a joint initiative with the major UK music publishers and the Music Publishers' Association to provide guidance about the photocopying of music.



**DO NOT
PHOTOCOPY
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Grade 5 Theory, Practical Musicianship or Jazz as a prerequisite

ABRSM believes that a thorough understanding of the elements of music is essential for the full and satisfying performance of a piece, especially at the stage when ‘standard repertoire’ items come into the picture (at about Grade 6). This is why the requirement to show that a candidate is a literate and numerate musician prior to Grade 6 entry has had such an important place in our structure for so many years, and it is also why so many developing musicians and their teachers around the world find the time spent on ‘theory’ worthwhile. ABRSM’s Grade 5 Theory, Practical Musicianship and Jazz exams have in common a level of musical understanding, including inventiveness and basic harmonic awareness, which acts as a solid foundation for further development as a musician. For this reason a minimum entry requirement for all Practical Grade 6, 7 and 8 candidates is a Pass in any of these subjects at Grade 5. (Grade 5 Theory is also accepted from the following: Trinity Guildhall, London College of Music, Australian Music Examinations Board and University of South Africa.) It is therefore beneficial in planning pupils’ future work to prepare from an early stage for this exploration of their skills. There is no time limit, incidentally, to the validity of any of these qualifications.

Each of these exams tests musical literacy to a comparable level but in a different way and through different skills. Each option has its own flavour and approach, but still provides that evidence of perception, understanding of musical concepts, discrimination and a developing inner ear that we’re looking for prior to Grade 6 and which gives such added value to ABRSM higher grades.

In the UK the Theory exams take place on a specific day three times a year within the normal exam sessions. Dates of Theory exams in international centres are printed in the *Music Examinations Dates and Fees* leaflet for each country. The Practical Musicianship exams, on the other hand, are treated like any other Practical subject as far as venue and exam dates are concerned. They are designed to be equally applicable to all instrumentalists and singers, and candidates are asked to respond to various tests by singing and playing an instrument of their own choice. Examiners broadly apply the aural test criteria when

assessing candidates and are looking for overall evidence of musicianship skills across a range of tests. The Practical Musicianship exam has proved a popular option with those candidates who prefer to demonstrate their understanding through their instrument or voice rather than on paper. Jazz exams are available in the UK at Visits (under the conditions outlined in the entry form) and in Jazz Week. Outside the UK, Local Representatives will be able to give details of Jazz exam availability.

Metronome marks

Pieces

Some metronome marks are the composer's own and some (generally indicated in square brackets) are editorial. Both indications will usually help the candidate to achieve the right approach to the style and character of the piece, but examiners will not be checking candidates' adherence to this mark; they will be assessing their ability to communicate the overall feeling of the music in a convincing performance.

Scales

The suggested minimum scale speeds are published as a guide only. Speed can be a contributory factor in the examiner's mark, but even and secure scales are always a better foundation than fast and accident-prone playing.

Order of exam

Candidates can choose to do the exam in any order. Instrumentalists and singers with an accompanist usually start with the prepared pieces/songs – if they decide not to it is worth telling the steward so the accompanist can be called at the right time. Keyboard players, guitarists, harpists and percussionists often begin with scales, but if another part of the exam is the preferred starting point, that is also quite acceptable and candidates should inform the examiner of their preference.

Ornaments

Candidates may use their discretion as to how they interpret ornaments – they are just another aspect of performance. If it is possible for them to be incorporated comfortably into the rhythm of the piece, they are always welcome as additional aspects of the style. If playing the suggested ornament is going to upset the pulse, then it is much better to shorten the ornament into a turn or mordent, or to leave it out entirely to keep the structure of the piece intact. It is from Grade 6 that pieces really requiring ornamentation should only be chosen when the ornaments can be incorporated, even if in modified form. In the lower grades examiners are happy to accept performances without ornaments (although they will not be able to award the highest marks), providing that other musical aspects, such as phrasing and dynamics, have been given consideration.

Our regulations state that candidates may use their discretion ‘regarding indications or markings (particularly editorial) in the music – e.g. metronome marks, fingering, bowing, phrasing, the interpretation of ornaments, etc. – which need not be strictly observed.’ And when playing from ABRSM publications it is worth remembering that any editorial realisation of ornaments is for guidance only and is not comprehensive or obligatory.

Page-turns

In most instances, without infringing the law, a photocopy may be made of a single page or passage to help with an awkward page-turn. For more information, see *The Code of Fair Practice* on www.mpaonline.org.uk, or contact the publisher or your local music publishers’ association for advice. Examiners will not help with page-turning, but pauses or difficulties with page-turning will not affect the marks. However, if there are a number of really awkward turns to negotiate which present no easy solution, candidates taking Grade 7 or 8, particularly on such instruments as double bass, guitar, harp and percussion, may bring a page-turner to assist, provided that permission has been obtained at the time of entry. Organists may bring a page-turner at any grade (permission not required). Accompanists are expected to turn their own pages. However, an accompanist may bring a page-turner without asking permission when playing for a Grade 8 candidate.

Playing from memory

There is no advantage, as far as exam results are concerned, in playing from memory (though it should be noted that singers *are* required to sing all their songs other than items from oratorios or other large-scale sacred works from memory). Very few candidates in fact play from memory, and those that do attempt it should do so only if they are entirely confident and have previously performed the piece from memory successfully. If memory slips occur in an exam it is much more difficult to start the piece again, and most candidates feel more secure playing from the music.

Repeats and *da capo*

Straightforward repeats of sections of the music are not normally required to be played (unless stipulated in the syllabus).

Da capo and *dal segno* signs should be observed – as they indicate repeats that are vital to the structure of the piece – as should any very short repeats of, say, two bars or so. If candidates feel able to embellish the material appropriately in the *da capo* of a Baroque item they may do so. Singers may perform all verses of a set song unless otherwise indicated in the syllabus, but should bear in mind the required programme length at the lowest grades and feel free to omit a verse of a song if little is being added to the overall effect of the performance by including it.

Scale requirements

The candidate will certainly not be tested on everything in the syllabus, but it is likely that two major and two minor scales will be asked for by the examiner, followed by at least one example from each of the other categories.

Sight-reading

The examiner will suggest that the candidate may try out any part or parts of the test for half a minute before going on with the full attempt. It is suggested that candidates first try the opening bars and the end, followed by any passages containing accidentals and such things as awkward changes of position.

OTHER TESTS, OTHER EXAMS

Prep Test

This is designed to provide an assessment for pupils after approximately six to nine months' tuition in most subjects and to encourage the building of good musical and technical foundations before pupils enter for the graded exams. The test takes about 10 minutes and includes simple tunes/exercises, a set piece, a piece chosen by the candidate, and some easy listening games/aural tests. Where accompaniments are needed, the examiner will be happy to play them, if requested. A certificate incorporating the examiner's short and positive report (there is no pass or fail for candidates to worry about) will be given to each candidate at the end of the test.

Performance Assessment

The purpose of this assessment is to provide an opportunity for adults, and a candidate of any age with special educational needs for whom the graded exams are not suitable, to have their prepared work assessed in a constructive way without the pressure normally associated with exams or public performances. There is no pass or fail here. It also enables such candidates to concentrate on their playing or singing, without anxiety, and to receive an independent evaluation of their performance. They choose their own programme, which lasts no more than 15 minutes and corresponds with the music styles and solo subjects covered in our other syllabuses. There are no supporting tests.

Jazz exams

Jazz exams are available in the UK and certain other international centres, offering syllabuses and a complete set of support publications for a range of wind instruments and piano (Grades 1–5 only), Jazz Ensembles at three levels and Jazz Performance Assessment. The arrangements for these pioneering exams and the details of the basis for assessment differ from those for other subjects. The relevant information may be found in the Jazz syllabus booklet. For the UK, exam dates and entry options are included on the entry form. In international centres, where available, this information is included in the *Music Examinations Dates and Fees* leaflet for each country. The exams are conducted by examiners with broad jazz experience.

Improvisation is at the heart of these syllabuses. They have been designed to encourage imagination and spontaneity, and to make the exams as accessible as possible to all students of jazz, from whichever direction they may be approaching this music.

For the Jazz Ensembles exams, groups comprising any combination of two or more instrumentalists, or a vocalist with one or more instrumentalists, may enter for an exam, the three levels being Initial, for performers of about Grade 3–4 standard, Intermediate, around Grades 5–6, and Advanced, for performers who have reached Grade 7–8 standard.

Ensembles

This syllabus has been designed to stimulate and encourage musicians to make music together and to enjoy the many benefits of musical team spirit as well as the exploration of new repertoire. Any reasonable combination of two to ten players and/or singers, with one person to each part, without the direction of a conductor, may enter for the exam. This includes piano duets and duos consisting of an instrumentalist or singer and a keyboard player, where both performers wish to be assessed as an ensemble. The levels of assessment are Primary, which is approaching the standard required in Grades 4–5, Intermediate, around Grades 6–7, and Advanced, for performers of around Grade 8 standard. For jazz ensembles see above.

A minimum of two items, contrasted in style and tempo, chosen either from the suggested lists (which are simply provided as a guideline to the standard) or from any other works of the group's own choice that are similar in standard and subject to prior approval, are required to be played.

The examiner will award an overall grade, rather than a mark, for the performance, and this together with the examiner's notes will be sent to the applicant, with certificates being issued to all members of the ensemble who together reach the pass standard or above.

Choral Singing

This subject, available in the UK and some international centres, is assessed by examiners with extensive choral experience who will provide a professional written assessment of the minimum three items

chosen for performance, awarding an overall grade in the same way as for the Ensemble exam. The syllabus gives guidance as to the standard required at the three different levels, Initial, Intermediate and Advanced. Any items similar in standard to those in the suggested lists for each level will be accepted. These may include some accompanied and unaccompanied items as specified for each level, though all choirs must comprise more than one voice to a part. Some vocal warming-up exercises of the choral director's choice should precede the prepared programme, and will also be included in the assessment.

Music Medals

Music Medals are our assessments and teaching resources, devised to introduce essential musical skills and encourage playing together.



Progressively structured across five levels, Music Medals provide goals and celebrate achievement. Copper and Bronze are for beginners, whilst Silver, Gold and Platinum reward further musical progress.

Fully supported by award winning publications, Music Medals are flexible and inclusive, providing a suggested teaching format and resources. Assessments take place in normal lesson time and each Music Medal covers three activities: playing together, playing solo and musicianship skills. Performances are video recorded, marked by the teacher and moderated by ABRSM. Successful candidates are awarded a certificate, and, of course, a Music Medal.

Music Medals assessments are available in the UK, and the ensemble publications are available worldwide.

www.abrsm.org/musicmedals

3 On the day

The suggestion that candidates should arrive at least 10 minutes before the actual time of their Practical exam is made to help ensure that the day runs as smoothly as possible for everyone. Teachers often come to the exam centre with their students, many of them to act as accompanist. It is best if just one adult comes with each young candidate, as space in the waiting room can be quite limited. If parents bring their child to the exam it is extremely important that they are themselves calm and positive about the occasion. However understandable their own tension may be, it is far more important that the young candidate feels a lack of pressure and goes into the exam room in a reasonably relaxed state.

It is very rare for a candidate to be upset during an exam, but sometimes the simple release of tension will cause candidates to come out of the exam room with a few tears. This can be distressing to others in the waiting room and in this unusual event the parent or teacher will help all concerned by being as matter of fact and as cheerful as possible.

NERVES

Shaking fingers, butterflies in the stomach and general agitation are all old friends to professional musicians. Newcomers to performing may find these perfectly natural symptoms distressing and need help in coping with them.

Parents, teachers and candidates should remember that these feelings are entirely normal. Accepting signs of heightened preparation for the activity to come is half the battle and using the extra adrenalin to good purpose is the next step.

It takes experience to deal with nerves. Most performers, especially if given plenty of calm support beforehand, learn to cope. Talking the situation through with the teacher can help and playing or singing to informal groups is also useful. Allowing plenty of time on the day, so there is no last-minute panic, and taking a few deep breaths are tried and tested ways to help the situation.

Candidates are always grateful for a cheerful, no-fuss attitude from accompanying adults. It is usually a case of 'least said, soonest mended' but it is always a good idea to remind them that the examiner is on their side and will be hoping to award good marks. One particularly kind and skilful steward I once met ushered young candidates in with the words 'It's exciting, isn't it?' Such a sensible approach, which turns fear into a positive feeling, will help the performance.

Adult candidates often suffer more from nerves than children. For a variety of reasons, all of them understandable, it frequently takes adults quite some time to settle down and begin to play the pieces. Usually all goes well and the examiner will certainly be understanding, but in rare cases where nerves prove too much of a stumbling block and are restricting progress, it may be wise to consider Performance Assessment as an alternative. This is an opportunity to play to the examiner without the pressure of passing or failing. Detailed comments are written at the time of the assessment and given to the candidate immediately. There are no supporting tests but 15 minutes are allowed for playing pieces of the candidate's own choice and also for a short chat with the examiner. Not surprisingly, many adults choose this stress-free option and find it ideal for focusing progress while avoiding the pass-fail situation, which some adults find at odds with the pleasure that they have in learning an instrument or singing.

WARMING UP, TUNING UP

Where possible, have a thorough warm-up session before leaving home or school to attend the exam – the benefits will last, even with a gap between the session and the exam itself.

It's fine to ask the examiner for a moment to warm up at the start of the exam by playing a scale or two, or a few bars of a piece.

Not all ABRSM exam centres have warm-up rooms, but there is plenty that can be done to prepare for the exam in the waiting room itself. For singers, quietly humming a few scales or, if you are a wind player, warming up your instrument by blowing gently and silently through it will help in preparing to sing or play. Warming up your embouchure, keeping mouthpieces warm in a pocket, exercising fingers to loosen them, running through pieces and scales in your mind – these are just some of the possibilities.

Where there is a warm-up room, time will be limited (the steward will indicate how long each candidate will have), and there may not be a piano. The brief time would be best used warming up, not practising, as there would probably not be time to run through all scales and pieces.

For piano candidates

- We go to great lengths to ensure the quality of the piano to be used in exams. Be reassured that examiners will understand exactly what you are experiencing as they always try out the instrument at the start of the day in order to be thoroughly familiar with its tone quality and touch – and they play it for the aural tests in every exam!
- Be prepared to play on either a grand or upright piano.
- It will help if you have had an opportunity to try out and adapt to other pianos, perhaps at school or a friend's house.
- It is sometimes possible to try out the exam piano before the event, and your Local Representative may be able to assist in arranging this. Also, examiners will be happy for piano candidates to try the piano briefly at the start of the exam. Starting with scales is another useful way of getting the feel of the instrument.

For other instrumentalists

Teachers may assist candidates with their tuning at Grades 1–5. If not attending the exam, teachers should ensure that the accompanist is able to help with tuning if necessary. However, the following provisos are in place:

- Bowed string candidates may have help in physically tuning their instruments up to and including Grade 5, as may percussion candidates in tuning timpani up to and including Grade 2, after which they should be able to do this for themselves. Guitarists must tune their instrument themselves at all grades, as must wind players, with advice from the teacher or accompanist if needed at Grades 1–5. Harpists should ensure that their instrument is carefully tuned before they enter the exam room, and, by the higher grades, be prepared to make adjustments between pieces if necessary.
- The examiner will not help to tune but, in an emergency, may suggest that the candidate returns at a later time when help has been sought.

WHO WILL THE EXAMINER BE?

ABRSM's team of over 600 examiners consists of respected musicians from every branch of the profession. It includes orchestral players, soloists, chamber music players, heads of school music departments and professors from the Royal Schools of Music, many of whose names are well-known in the musical world. All panel members are fully vetted for working with children and understand, and work within, our Child Safeguarding and Equal Opportunities policies.

The selection and training of examiners is extremely demanding. After two and a half days of initial training at our offices, successful trainees undergo a further four days of individual tuition with experienced examiners, the last of which takes the form of an entire day's examining, observed by the Chief Examiner or her deputy. If this goes smoothly, the trainee will then be allowed to examine alone.

Regular moderation then follows and all mark forms are read by the Readers' Panel. Once an examiner is appointed, the professional in-service training continues with moderation, the reading of a sample of mark forms and attendance at seminars, when marking exercises take place. The consistency achieved by these means is monitored by statistical reviews each examining session.

In the selection and appointment of examiners, the personality of applicants is as important as their musical pedigree. It is vital that each examiner is able to put nervous candidates at ease and create an atmosphere in which they can do their best. Every individual is likely to achieve this in different ways and some examiners are naturally more outgoing than others, but all understand how the candidate is feeling, many of them having gone through the grades themselves. Every examiner hopes that the candidates will do well.

Examining for ABRSM is recognised as one of the most exacting and skilful jobs in the music profession. All those who form the team of over 600 examiners feel a keen sense of personal responsibility when they arrive at the exam venue. They will be looking forward to the various performances and personalities that will make up another day, which will invariably be demanding and tiring, sometimes exhilarating, but always deeply rewarding.

EXAM TIMINGS

Waiting rooms are presided over by a steward who will show candidates into the exam room and make sure that the timetable runs smoothly. The exam will seem to pass very quickly and the candidate will be out of the room again within 12 minutes for Grade 1, each grade taking a little longer up to the 30 minutes allowed for Grade 8. A few extra minutes will be allowed to certain groups of candidates for setting-up and tuning, such as those entered for Grade 2–5 stringed, wind and percussion instrument exams, all harp candidates, singing candidates at Grades 1–3 or special cases such as blind, partially-sighted, hearing-impaired and dyslexic candidates.

Exams usually run on time, and keeping to the timetable is part of an examiner's training. However, the candidates do, to some extent, dictate the speed of the exam and if they choose very slow speeds for scales, sight-reading and the playing of the pieces there is little the examiner can do about it. The steward will keep waiting candidates informed and it may be wise to go for a short walk rather than to sit anxiously in the waiting room.

PRACTICAL EXAM ELEMENTS

Most exams consist of three pieces, chosen by the candidate from the appropriate lists in the current syllabus, scales and arpeggios (or an unaccompanied traditional song for singers), sight-reading (or quick study for Jazz candidates) and aural tests. These elements and the pieces may be played in the order of the candidate's choice. Total marks in all individual Practical exams are 150. 100 marks are required to achieve Pass, 120 marks to pass with Merit and 130 marks to pass with Distinction.

- Pieces/songs are marked out of 30 (singing programmes for Grades 6–8 have different but proportionally adjusted marks).
- Scales, sight-reading, quick study and traditional song are marked out of 21.
- Aural tests are marked out of 18.

In each case two-thirds (66%) of the total possible marks is the mark required for a Pass. A Pass in each individual section is not required to pass overall.

Pieces

Each piece will be assessed independently using the principle of marking from the required pass mark negatively or positively. The initial selection of pieces for each subject is drawn up by experienced specialist teachers and performers who are appointed for each revision as consultants. An independent specialist then moderates the material for the entire category to ensure a similar and appropriate standard overall. The final list is approved in-house at ABRSM.

Technical requirements

The gradual building of a key sense is as important as the growing physical dexterity needed to perform these requirements successfully. Memory has to be reliable before speed becomes a possibility. Firm, even tone and a rhythmical flow at the minimum suggested speeds will gain a Pass. Higher marks are awarded for greater fluency, provided that evenness of tone is maintained.

Memorising the key patterns and chord shapes required for scales and arpeggios needs to be done in small bursts, tackling one or two at a time. This approach is much more likely to produce a confident, purposeful set of requirements that will be satisfying for the candidate to perform and a good boost for general confidence.

The recommended minimum speeds that follow are only a rough guide and experienced teachers will know what their candidates will achieve safely, but it is important to avoid accurate but extremely laboured playing which shows that the scale has been memorised but lacks the finger facility which is such an important technical foundation.

Recommended minimum speeds for scales and arpeggios

Please refer to the scale books published by ABRSM for further information.

Piano

	Scales	Broken chords and arpeggios
Grade 1	$\text{♩} = 60$	$\text{♩} = 46$
Grade 2	$\text{♩} = 66$	$\text{♩} = 63$
Grade 3	$\text{♩} = 80$	$\text{♩} = 69$
Grade 4	$\text{♩} = 52$	$\text{♩} = 76$
Grade 5	$\text{♩} = 63$	$\text{♩} = 88$
Grade 6	$\text{♩} = 76$	$\text{♩} = 50$
Grade 7	$\text{♩} = 80$	$\text{♩} = 56$
Grade 8	$\text{♩} = 88$	$\text{♩} = 66$

Strings

Bowing will dictate the tempi of slurred scales and arpeggios for strings. Scales and arpeggios with separate bows should be brisk, using no more than half the bow length.

Guitarists should start scales at $\text{♩} = 88$ at Grade 1,

increasing to $\text{♩} = 184$ at Grade 4,

reaching $\text{♩} = 120$ by Grade 5,

$\text{♩} = 132$ by Grade 6

and $\text{♩} = 160$ by Grade 8.

Singing

An unaccompanied traditional song is performed for this part of the exam. Maintenance of a secure sense of key, without the help of a piano part, is very important.

Woodwind and brass

Major and minor scales, chromatic scales, scales in thirds, whole-tone scales, dominant and diminished sevenths.

	Woodwind and brass valved instruments (excluding horn)	Horn	Trombone
Grade 1	♩ = 50	♩ = 50	♩ = 44
Grade 2	♩ = 56	♩ = 56	♩ = 48
Grade 3	♩ = 66	♩ = 66	♩ = 56
Grade 4	♩ = 72	♩ = 72	♩ = 63
Grade 5	♩ = 80	♩ = 80	♩ = 72
Grade 6	♩ = 104	♩ = 96	♩ = 96
Grade 7	♩ = 116	♩ = 108	♩ = 108
Grade 8	♩ = 132	♩ = 120	♩ = 120

Major and minor arpeggios

Grade 1	♪ = 72	♪ = 72	♪ = 66
Grade 2	♪ = 80	♪ = 80	♪ = 72
Grade 3	♪ = 92	♪ = 92	♪ = 84
Grade 4	♪ = 100	♪ = 100	♪ = 92
Grade 5	♪ = 112	♪ = 112	♪ = 104
Grade 6	♩ = 56	♩ = 56	♩ = 46
Grade 7	♩ = 66	♩ = 66	♩ = 56
Grade 8	♩ = 76	♩ = 76	♩ = 60

Breathing should be incorporated where possible to maintain line, and should certainly not be used as a means to negotiate the break or octave.

Sight-reading

‘I can’t do this’, candidates sometimes sigh when the examiner puts the test on the music stand. It is often the fear of the unknown, plus lack of practice and guidance, which add to the confusion. Sight-reading ability is an invaluable asset, making music so much more accessible and helping the learning process to be much faster.

Candidates are always given 30 seconds’ preparation time to look through and try out the test. This is sufficient to check the time signature, the key signature, to set up a regular basic pulse, to play or sing the opening and the final bar and to check any awkward-looking corners on the way. Not all candidates appear to be aware of this, but we do actively encourage them to play/sing parts of the test, which helps them to use the 30 seconds in a productive and confidence-building way.

When working towards this test, candidates should be encouraged to look slightly ahead, keep going at a manageable speed, ignore any slips and keep their nerve. It may be helpful to know that examiners rarely hear perfect attempts at these tests but will always appreciate evidence of the right approach, plus an awareness of key and time values which gradually increases with the grades.

Aural tests

Candidates often do much better in this section than they imagine at the time. These tests only take a few minutes but tell the examiner a great deal about the all-round aural awareness of the candidate. The different sections cover many aspects of listening, including some interval training with the sight-singing and recognition of various elements of a short piece played by the examiner. Marks are not awarded for each part of the tests or deducted for mistakes but reflect the candidate’s overall response. Those who prefer not to sing can hum or whistle. It is not the quality of the sound that matters and examiners, who are well aware of the challenges faced by candidates with changing voices, can tell all they need to know, regardless of vocal quality, in this small but important part of the exam.

For Grade 1–3 candidates who find the explanation of the ‘spot-the-difference’ test a difficulty, it is perfectly acceptable for them to raise their hand when they hear the difference and to explain it in very

simple terms. The examiner will notice the speed and accuracy of the response whether it is signalled, sung, clapped or spoken.

HINTS AND TIPS FOR CANDIDATES

Practical exams

- Ask your teacher to check the tuning and condition of your instrument before your exam, e.g. adjusters (make sure they are not fully wound in), resin on the bow, reeds, keys etc.
- Arrive at the waiting room at least 10 minutes before your exam is due to start. Last-minute panics do not help the playing or singing.
- Don't forget your instrument or music – it actually happens sometimes! The equivalent disaster in a theory exam is to forget to bring suitable pens and pencils.
- If you are a string player, remember to carry spare strings in your case, and if you are a woodwind player, a spare reed.
- A smile will help you relax and boost your confidence as you go into the exam room.
- Remember to get yourself comfortable and settled before you begin. If the stool or music stand is the wrong height don't be scared to adjust it or ask for help.
- Pianists may ask to try out the piano first. Try a scale or a section of the first piece – it won't be marked. Also, decide in advance whether you wish to start with scales or pieces in the exam.
- Be ready to tell the examiner what you are going to play or sing. If you are likely to forget, write the names of the pieces on a piece of paper (singers should do this in any case).
- Try to keep going in the exam even if there are a few stumbles. They will almost certainly not be as disastrous as you think.
- Don't worry about short pauses after your pieces – the examiner will be writing and will ask you to go on before too long.
- If the examiner asks for a scale, or an aural test, which seems unfamiliar, do not be afraid to say so. It is much easier to correct an error at once, should there be a mistake.

- It may be necessary for the examiner to stop you during a longer piece, but be assured he or she will have heard sufficient to have formed an impression of how you perform and how well you have prepared your pieces.
- Speak clearly and confidently when answering the aural tests – try to remember that the examiner wants you to do well!
- When examiners are being trained or moderated, it is necessary for them to work in pairs. Don't be put off if two people are present; only one will be marking your performance. Occasionally, too, your exam may be recorded; this helps us with our quality assurance process.

A note about mistakes

Examiners understand only too well that mistakes can happen during the exam which may not have occurred at home, but of course they can only mark what they actually hear on the day. Teachers are sometimes disappointed with the result, as they are comparing it with the playing in the relaxed circumstances of a lesson, without having had the opportunity of hearing the performance on the actual day. Even professional musicians expect a higher rate of mistakes during a concert performance than would occur in rehearsal, so inexperienced performers should not overreact or lose heart when slips occur.

It is wise to plan ahead for these 'unforced errors' and practise picking up the tempo quickly to keep the piece in shape. Examiners appreciate quick recovery from slips and all is not lost by small hesitations, providing the piece keeps its overall shape.

A note for singers

Diction for singers, especially the crisp enunciation of consonants, is vital for a fully expressive and communicative performance.

Tonal awareness is just as important for singers as for instrumentalists, and is communicated in the purity and matching of vowels and the management of a legato line. The communication of the songs and choice of repertoire are particularly important for singers, who are required to perform from memory. Singers are sometimes unsure where to look when performing: just above the examiner's head is the best place. Examiners are not able to look at the performer all the

time as they will be writing, but a singer's projection of the music and meaning of the words can be heard as well as seen.

HOW DO EXAMINERS ASSESS PERFORMANCE?

The tables on the following pages give the basis of assessment. These are minimalist 'criteria' statements, which give clear guidance on what the examiner is looking for in the various sections. Every performance is unique and results are arrived at by balancing the various qualities in the playing, using the skill that comes from training and experience.

Assessment objectives

ABRSM's performance exams aim to give students opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding to perform music with accuracy, technical fluency and musical awareness. Candidates are assessed on their ability to perform the set works with:

Accuracy, continuity and fluency

Accuracy encompasses the technical control and co-ordination required to produce correct rhythm, including continuity of performance; convincing tempo, including consistency of the chosen speeds; clearly audible observance of performing directions; and accurate pitch, including well-centred intonation where appropriate. Slips from basically secure intonation are not as serious as an inability to centre the pitch precisely, which causes a loss of tonality.

Tonal awareness

Tonal awareness covers the way an instrument is used and includes situations where a poor instrument may be skilfully managed. It encompasses the ability: to produce focused and consistent tone where required; to control and contrast dynamics and attack as appropriate to the musical context; and to grade musical tone into phrases. Pedalling for pianists and vibrato for string players are extra tonal refinements that are welcomed at all stages but not expected until Grade 5.

Musical character and a sense of performance

Musical character arises from the imaginative application of technical skills in ways that will most vividly convey the mood of the piece to the listener. A sense of performance encompasses the degree of engagement with the music, including the level of commitment and conviction evident in the playing or singing.

Candidates will also be assessed on their abilities:

- to perform the prescribed technical exercises for the grade (e.g. scales and arpeggios) with fluency, accuracy, evenness and musical shape
- to respond to prescribed aural tests accurately, promptly and with musical perception
- to perform a short piece of unfamiliar music with accuracy, control, continuity and attention to expressive detail

Not all of the assessment objectives will necessarily be met in order for a candidate to pass. A sense of musical character in performance, for example, is not required for a Pass to be awarded and is more appropriately identified with higher levels of attainment. Weakness in some of the assessment objectives may be balanced by better performance in others. The mark awarded will depend in practice on the extent to which the candidate has met the assessment objectives overall.

Assessment criteria

Pieces

The following table illustrates the basis of marking within the broad result bands. Each piece will be assessed independently using the principle of marking from the required pass mark negatively or positively, rather than awarding marks by deduction from the maximum or addition from zero. In awarding marks, examiners will balance the extent to which the cumulative qualities and abilities listed below are demonstrated and contribute towards the overall result.

Grades 1–5	Grades 6–8
27–30 Distinction <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Technical fluency● Confident sense of performance and tonal control● Sensitivity to musical detail and mood● A musically convincing tempo	Distinction <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Musically authoritative playing, showing a high level of technical assurance● Sensitive use of tonal qualities and rubato where appropriate● An instinctive and communicative sense of performance
24–26 Merit <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Attention to dynamics and phrasing● Evidence of tonal awareness and control● A suitable, sustained tempo● Sense of the character of the piece● Good sense of rhythm	Merit <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Awareness of style shown by good use of dynamic range, shape of phrasing and rubato● Tonal control contributing to the musical character● A musically convincing tempo● Attention to the musical detail

Grades 1–5	Grades 6–8
<p>20–23 Pass</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● General security of notes and rhythm ● Suitable tempo ● A reasonable sense of continuity ● Evidence of careful preparation ● Prompt recovery from any slips 	<p>Pass</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overall security at a suitable and sustained tempo ● Evidence of musical awareness, e.g. appropriate dynamics, phrasing, articulation
<p>17–19 Below Pass standard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Just under the acceptable standard in general accuracy ● Inadequate sense of continuity ● Poor recovery from slips 	<p>Below Pass standard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Just under the acceptable standard in general accuracy ● A few slips or breaks in continuity ● Absence of dynamics, phrasing and articulation ● Unsuitable or unsustained tempo ● Inappropriate style
<p>13–16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Serious difficulties with notes and/or time ● Frequent stumbles and breaks in continuity ● Halting or incomplete performance ● Serious lack of tonal control ● Very weak in all respects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Serious difficulties with notes and/or time ● Frequent stumbles and breaks in continuity ● Halting or incomplete performance ● Absence of musical detail ● Serious lack of tonal control ● Only some passages mastered
<p>10–12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Technically totally inadequate ● Unable to continue for more than a few beats without error 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Technically totally inadequate ● Unable to continue for more than a short section without error
<p>0</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No work offered

Scales, arpeggios and unaccompanied traditional song

These comprise a progressive development of essential instrumental or vocal skills. This scheme of marking is applied to each grade. The pass mark is 14; the maximum mark is 21.

All grades

- 19–21**
- Quick response
 - Fluent and musically presented
 - Confident and even tempo
-
- 17–18**
- Prompt response
 - Well prepared
 - Technically mostly secure and even
 - Few small slips or corrections
-
- 14–16**
- Cautious response
 - Moderate tempo
 - Keys known, despite some errors
 - Momentum generally maintained
-
- 11–13 Below Pass standard**
- Poor response
 - Slow and inconsistent tempo
 - Frequent errors
 - Some incomplete items
-
- 7–10**
- Very poor or incomplete response
 - Extremely sporadic and uneven playing
 - Very slow tempo
 - Technically inadequate
-
- 0**
- No work offered
-

Sight-reading

ABRSM publishes specimen sight-reading tests in all subjects for all grades. These illustrate the gradual, increasing difficulties which candidates will be required to face. Organ candidates and some brass candidates additionally undertake a transposition test at Grades 6, 7 and 8, and harpsichord candidates at all grades have a figured bass test. The examiner allows half a minute for silent or performed preparation according to the wishes of the candidate before the assessment begins. As with scales, arpeggios and unaccompanied traditional song, the pass mark is 14; the maximum mark is 21.

All grades

-
- 19–21**
- Fluent
 - Attention to expressive details
 - Musically aware
-
- 17–18**
- Mostly accurate
 - Usually steady pulse
 - Appropriate tempo
-
- 14–16**
- Outline in place, despite errors
 - Momentum generally maintained
 - Some awareness of key and time signatures
-
- 11–13 Below Pass standard**
- Poor recognition of time and notes
 - Lack of continuity
 - Inconsistent awareness of key
-
- 7–10**
- Very poor recognition of time and notes
 - No continuity or incomplete attempt
 - Complete disregard for key
-
- 0**
- No work offered
-

Aural tests

ABRSM publishes specimen aural tests for all grades. All candidates take the same group of tests. These are carefully graded from basic recognition of rhythm and memory of short phrases to tests demanding well-developed aural perception and discrimination. The pass mark is 12; the maximum mark is 18.

All grades

18 ● Quick, accurate and perceptive response

15–17 ● Good response
● Minor errors or hesitation

12–14 ● Approximately half the tests correctly answered
● Evidence of awareness, despite hesitation and error

9–11 **Below Pass standard**
● Slow and uncertain responses
● Inaccuracy in parts of all tests

6–8 ● Very slow and mostly incorrect responses
● All tests entirely inaccurate

0 ● No work offered

THE VIEW FROM THE EXAMINER'S CHAIR

Examiners all hope to appear unhurried and to put candidates at ease but the mark forms still have to be completed at the time of the exam.

A typical Grade 1 piece lasts about a minute, during which a full assessment, reflecting the mark and giving guidance, has to be finished. Sometimes all three pieces are played straight through with scarcely a break for the examiner to say 'Thank you, go on to the next when you are ready.' A moment's silence from the examiner after the end of a piece is not a sign of disapproval but simply the end of the sentence being written.

Aural tests must be commented on after returning to the desk, as these tests are administered by the examiner at the piano, so again there may be a short period of silence.

The need to keep to time is always a pressure, as candidates in the waiting room get anxious if things are running late. Given the number of candidates heard and mark forms written during a typical day, it is no wonder that examiners sometimes suffer from writer's cramp!

It is worth remembering that the examiner can only comment on what he or she has heard in the exam room. The exam assesses the candidate's achievement, not potential. It is not intended to be a lesson.

For training and moderation purposes, it is sometimes necessary for two examiners to work together. Candidates will be told by the steward at the exam venue when this is happening and reassured that only one of the examiners will be marking their performance. This is an entirely normal and necessary procedure which ensures the high level of consistency in marking and procedure during the exams. Exams may also occasionally be recorded for quality assurance purposes.

THEORY EXAMS

ABRSM's Theory of Music exams aim to give students a thorough understanding of the building blocks of music, starting with the basics of rhythm and notes, and going on to cover harmony and counterpoint, composition, and a broad knowledge of western music, including composers and their works, structure, form, style and period.

Each theory paper is marked out of a total of 100, with 66 marks required for a Pass, 80 for a Merit and 90 for a Distinction.

Hints and tips for candidates

- Make sure you read each question carefully and understand what is needed.
- If a question has several different parts, you might find it easier to tick off each part as you complete it – that way you will not miss any.
- Write your answers neatly and clearly on the printed question paper. At the higher grades, if you need to do some rough work first, you should use the manuscript paper provided for you. Don't take any of your own paper into the exam – not even if it is blank!
- Always check through your theory paper before leaving the exam room and make sure you have answered all the questions. There will be a 'Turn the page' reminder at the bottom right-hand corner of a page where necessary.
- It is a good idea to work through some past papers before the exam so that you get used to working within a time limit. It will also prepare you for the sort of questions you will get in the exam itself.

How do markers assess theory papers?

ABRSM's team of more than a hundred theory markers work from a set of detailed marking guidelines. In addition they are issued with a specific marking scheme for each paper. As with the panel of Practical examiners, markers are closely monitored, and their work is analysed right down to individual question level.

In the theory papers at Grades 1–5 many of the questions test more than one aspect of the syllabus, and the answers are often right or wrong. Frequently, however, even factual questions can produce answers that are partly right or ambiguous, and these require special care in marking. The marking scheme issued with each paper shows the specific allocation of marks and provides detailed guidance on any particular problems that seem likely to arise.

Candidates who fail to reach a pass standard in several questions are likely to fail overall, even though there may be one or two very good marks elsewhere. On the other hand, candidates who have a sound overall understanding may well pass, despite a poor performance in one or two questions and some general carelessness. Markers and moderators are always looking for that additional mark which will make the difference between success and failure. For example, no marks are deducted for incorrect spelling, provided the meaning is clear, and examiners are flexible about accepting non-standard descriptions or terms, again, where the meaning is clear.

Occasionally there will be an interlocked question, where the answer to one question may depend upon an answer to an earlier question: for example, candidates may be asked to name the key of a passage, and then to give the degree of the scale of a particular note in the same passage. If the candidate has identified the key incorrectly the marker will give full credit for the degree of the scale of the note if it is correct in relation to the key the candidate chose.

Teachers often ask how scale questions are marked. Here are some of the basic expectations:

- For full marks, scales must be correctly written according to the stated key, clef, direction and note values.

- Standard deductions are made for various common mistakes. In the following cases, candidates lose one mark (assuming a maximum of five) if the scale is written:
 - up instead of down, or vice versa
 - with a key signature instead of without, or vice versa
 - with an incorrect key signature, but corrected by accidentals
 - correctly, but in the wrong clef
 - with the wrong time values
 - harmonic minor instead of melodic, or vice versa
- Two marks are deducted for each wrong or missing note and a maximum of two marks for additional note(s) at the end (the scale should begin and end on the tonic).

A word about the melody writing. For the highest marks, markers are looking for a melody that has a good sense of shape and direction and which makes harmonic sense. It will have unity of style and a clear phrase structure. Aspects of the given opening will have been used and developed well. If the melody doesn't begin on the first beat of the bar this will have been noticed. The melody will work well on the instrument, and tempo, dynamics and performance directions will be musical.

Most of the melodies that earn high marks will be soundly put together to a well-tried formula. However, there will be an occasional entry that shows real originality and a creative sense of eloquence. Sometimes this may be quite unconventional, e.g. the phrase-lengths may be uneven or the tonality unexpected; in such cases the line between brilliance and incompetence can sometimes be thin and the marker's judgement needs to be acute! But markers are asked not to penalise the work simply because it is not 'according to the book'.

Whereas in earlier grades many of the questions cover more than one element of the syllabus, at Grades 6, 7 and 8 each of the first three questions is normally geared towards one primary task. In all the questions markers are looking for competency that supports the demands made on candidates in Practical subjects at these levels. Aspects of melody and harmony are explored in depth, and in the context questions an appropriate level of musical perception is expected.

For example, in the question that requires an understanding of figured bass, either for four-part voices (SATB) or for keyboard, the chief consideration in marking is the need for a correct interpretation of the figuring. If this is achieved then the working will normally pass, unless grammatical aspects and part-writing are seriously adrift. Markers are looking for workings which, in addition to the figuring being correctly interpreted, have a melodic line with musical shape and interest, part-writing which shows some sense of musical line, correct handling of the basic chord progressions and respect for the rules of musical grammar.

All candidates are issued with a mark form which details the marks awarded for each question and gives a steer as to directions for further study. These are posted with the results to the applicant about six weeks after the exam has taken place (sometimes a little longer in international centres).

4 After the exam

THE EXAMINER'S MARK FORM

Each area of a Practical exam is marked on its own merits, positively or negatively from the pass mark, using the published criteria. Marks are not deducted from the total or added from zero but reflect the overall balance of strengths and weaknesses. Also, examiners are not in any way guided by a requirement to pass or fail a certain percentage of candidates.

To the examiners, every mark has its own significance. They hope that the comments will encourage as well as reflect the mark, but when writing at such speed it is not always possible to mention every aspect or thought that has passed through their minds when reaching a decision.

All examiners want candidates to do their best and, although they are making assessments in a formal situation, do remember that examiners are human beings and always feel for the less confident performers, sharing the pleasure and satisfaction when all goes well.

THE RESULTS AND AFTER

Results are posted to applicants after the end of each exam tour once all the double-checking has been completed. This usually takes between two and four weeks in the UK, but may take a little longer in some countries. As the majority of candidates do indeed pass, applicants receive in the post a large envelope containing: the mark form, written at the time of the exam; an impressive certificate, with the candidate's name on it; and an entry form for the eventual next grade.

There is understandable euphoria and an overwhelming sense of personal achievement at having successfully passed another milestone. Most candidates experience a surge of renewed enthusiasm for their particular instrument and this is an ideal time to explore new repertoire and different styles. Although the next grade may seem to be the most important step, it usually takes a year between grades, and an exam syllabus, however interesting and comprehensive, is not an ideal musical diet for this entire period.

The mark form is obviously read with great interest; it is sometimes difficult for candidates to remember exactly what they did on the day. The examiner will give a clear indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the performance. This usually provides reassurance and encouragement for candidates, parents and teachers, all of whom will feel justifiable pleasure at being so firmly on the right lines.

It is important to remember that success begins at the pass mark. The result may be a little lower than is expected, due to a number of factors – especially ‘big day nerves’ – but if the exam is safely passed it is usually much better to look with confidence to the future, rather than agonise over the few marks that might have been achieved on a different day.

A Pass for one pupil may be a real triumph and the result of just as much hard work as another, whose different talents will achieve a Distinction. Examiners are always aware that the achievement for the less musically talented candidates is sometimes more than that of those to whom music comes naturally.

It is good to know that all over the world people measure their success with confidence in the ABRSM graded system and it gives a clear indication of the level achieved, which is also useful for entry to schools and universities. Indeed, UCAS points are allocated to Grade 6, 7 and 8 Practical and theory exams in connection with UK university and college entrance. Students benefit from the following points recommendations:

		Practical	Theory
Grade 8	Distinction	75	30
	Merit	70	25
	Pass	55	20
Grade 7	Distinction	60	20
	Merit	55	15
	Pass	40	10
Grade 6	Distinction	45	15
	Merit	40	10
	Pass	25	5

Not least of the benefits is the personal growth which inevitably takes place during the period of preparation and facing the challenge of the day itself.

'But what if I fail?'

It is important to keep any failure in proportion. The extent of the failure will be a helpful guide and the common causes of failure are listed in the basis of assessment. If the fail is a near miss, within five or so marks of a Pass, it may well be worth another try at the next session. This should not be counted as too disappointing a result, as only a few marks are involved and just that extra bit of preparation may well make up the gap.

Failures of more than 10 marks could be a useful indication of several situations. The candidate may be unsuited to the instrument or may have been put in for the exam unwisely. It is possible that the preparation had not been comprehensive or started early enough and it may, in rare cases, also be a sign that the candidate is not suited to taking exams and may be happier just playing or finding other performance opportunities. Another cause of failure is that the pieces have been learnt over a long period of time with a subsequent loss of interest. Sometimes a parent has insisted that a child takes an exam even though there is resistance from the child, or it is against the teacher's advice.

If it is decided to have another try at the same grade, it may be worth considering changing the pieces. It is sometimes difficult to breathe life into 'tired' pieces and the pupil may associate the music with failure. However, if the margin of failure has been narrow, with the benefit of extra time and the examiner's comments, it is usually possible to lift the performance level over the pass line.

Whatever the result, it is invariably the case that more progress has been made because of the impending exam than would have been made without this goal.

NEXT STEPS

Some years ago a Distinction at Grade 8 indicated that the candidate might be a suitable applicant to one of the UK music colleges. This is no longer necessarily the case. Our standard has not changed but music colleges (with their reduced numbers of students and increased internationalism) have raised the level of entry well beyond ABRSM Grade 8 standard.

If a candidate who has achieved a good Distinction at this level is very keen on a professional career, it may be worth contacting one of the Royal Schools of Music for a consultation lesson and professional advice. The graded system will have provided a reliable and comprehensive foundation but those considering music as a career should always seek guidance before taking the plunge.

DIPLOMAS

Diploma of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music
(DipABRSM)

Licentiate of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music
(LRSM)

Fellow of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music
(FRSM)

Qualifications have never been as important as in the present educational and professional climate. Our fully accredited suite of diplomas carries worldwide recognition. The diplomas are available in three subject-lines: Music Performance, Music Direction and Instrumental/ Vocal Teaching; and at three levels: DipABRSM, LRSM and FRSM. Each subject-line has its own syllabus document.

Each diploma consists of two sections, the main performance part, and the second section, which always contains two requirements. At each level, there is a viva voce, and some written work, a quick study for Performance and Teaching candidates, and an arrangement for Direction candidates.

The expectations and demands of these diplomas are very much a reflection of ABRSM's unique and distinctive examining status. They are designed to be appropriate for a wide range of candidates, who will find that accessibility is increased through the option of a musician's

own professional experience being taken into consideration. They are compatible with systems of assessment widely applied in higher education worldwide.

Younger candidates, whether or not they plan to enter the music profession, will find the stimulation, challenge and recognition offered by the diplomas of great value. Mature candidates will have the personal and professional benefits of the preparation and achievement, plus the knowledge that their DipABRSM, LRSM or FRSM is recognised throughout the world as the gold standard at this level.

Diploma syllabuses are available from music retailers worldwide, and from ABRSM's Honorary Local Representatives, International Representatives and head office in London. The syllabuses give comprehensive information on every aspect of these exams, plus repertoire, guidance on preparation and the criteria against which performances will be assessed.

www.abrsm.org/exams/diplomas

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

ABRSM provides a rich variety of continuing professional development courses for music teachers worldwide. In addition to our core courses (see below) we also offer syllabus seminars (at times when particular syllabuses are updated) and other courses to support teachers' development throughout their careers.

Our core courses are as follows:

Certificate of Teaching (CT ABRSM) course

The Certificate of Teaching (CT ABRSM) course is about developing your teaching skills and helping you to reflect on what works for you and your students. Starting at the very beginning you'll compare how you were taught with how you teach now, review your strengths and weaknesses and consider how you can build on those strengths to become a better teacher. By the end of the course you'll be able to review your own teaching and make judgments about how effective it is as well as introduce new teaching techniques to your lessons.

The course is open to anyone who is 21 years or over, has a minimum of one year's teaching experience and teaches at least five pupils regularly. It's an open-access course, which means that you don't need to have formal qualifications to enrol.

Our part-time course comprises 12 study days, four introductory days and four study weekends, over a period of nine months. In the time between study sessions you'll work with one of our mentors. You'll also be asked to complete three written assignments and two action research projects throughout the year. The fast-track course has identical content and a similar structure but comprises 10 study days over a period of 5 months. There are three residential study sessions. Once again you'll work with one of our mentors between sessions.

CT ABRSM draws on your own teaching experience and practice so you can fit the work around your students. At the end of the course you'll be awarded a CT ABRSM qualification and you'll be able to use the letters CT ABRSM after your name.

Teaching Music Effectively

Teaching Music Effectively is designed to help you develop your teaching skills and to build confidence. You'll work closely with a subject mentor to look at some of the instrument specific issues relating to teaching. You'll also explore current theories in music education and how these can be applied to your lessons. You'll receive feedback on your current teaching and advice on how to incorporate new techniques into your lessons to make them more effective.

This course is ideal for teachers of all disciplines; you may be new to the profession, or simply looking to refresh your approach. You need to be 18 years or over and teaching at least one pupil regularly to enrol for this course. You don't need any formal qualifications to take part, although we recommend that you're approximately Grade 5 standard or above on your chosen instrument.

Teaching Music Effectively is a three-month course. There are two study days at the start of the course followed by a distance-learning module of between eight and ten weeks, and then two study days at the end of the course.

Introduction to Instrumental and Vocal Teaching

This one-day course offers an insight into instrumental and vocal teaching as a career, provides ideas on how to get started and the key skills required to succeed. You will work with one of our experienced course leaders and your course colleagues to address teaching related issues.

This course is for any musician who is considering instrumental or vocal teaching for the first time or who has recently started teaching. You don't need any formal qualifications to enrol for this course although you should be aged 16 years or over and already be a musician.

Your course leader will outline some of the key theories in music education, explore some of the common issues that arise, and discuss ways to approach aspects of planning to enhance your teaching skills. Throughout the day you'll explore the skills required to become an effective music teacher and discover the many resources available to you.

Jazz courses – Introductory and Intermediate

ABRSM jazz courses provide an excellent introduction to jazz for piano, woodwind or brass teachers. The courses are open to anyone interested in expanding their teaching repertoire or wishing to explore jazz with their pupils. You will explore jazz concepts and gain the confidence you need to teach jazz to your students.

You don't need any formal qualifications to enrol on our jazz courses; however you should already be an instrumental music teacher. You don't need any prior experience of jazz for the introductory course, but the intermediate course requires a reasonable understanding of the basics.

www.abrsm.org/teachers

5 Getting in touch

Syllabuses, information booklets and entry forms are available free of charge.

In the UK and Ireland

Contact your Honorary Local Representative – a list of Representatives is printed in the UK and Ireland edition of the *Examination Information & Regulations* booklet, and appears on our website.

If there is no local contact, or if you need further help, please contact ABRSM:

T +44 (0)20 7636 5400

F +44 (0)20 7637 0234

E abrsm@abrsm.ac.uk

In all other countries

Contact your Local Representative or Contact as listed in the *Music Examinations Dates and Fees* leaflet for your country. A list of Representatives and Contacts is printed in the International Edition of the *Examination Information & Regulations* booklet, and appears on our website.

If there is no local contact, or if you need further help, please contact ABRSM:

T +44 (0)20 7467 8240

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E international@abrsm.ac.uk

Online

www.abrsm.org – for syllabuses, supporting information, publications and courses.

The Royal Schools of Music

Royal Academy of Music, London
www.ram.ac.uk

Royal College of Music, London
www.rcm.ac.uk

Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester
www.rncm.ac.uk

Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama,
Glasgow
www.rsamd.ac.uk

These Music Exams is your guide to the full range of ABRSM music exams and assessments. It includes useful information covering all elements of preparing for and taking music exams. You will find answers to questions raised by candidates, teachers and parents, and the criteria for assessment used by ABRSM examiners.

Earning an ABRSM certificate is a rewarding experience. Our music exams provide students with inspiration, focus and a real sense of achievement.

Clara Taylor, FRAM FRSA LRAM, was appointed Chief Examiner at ABRSM in 1997. During her tenure she travelled extensively giving seminars and workshops that increased understanding of our work and served to reinforce the view that teachers and examiners are all working towards a common goal: the improvement in quality of instrumental playing and singing worldwide and the encouragement of potential in all pupils.

Clara studied at the Royal Academy of Music and spent the first part of her career as an accompanist giving concerts throughout the world with well-known singers and instrumentalists. She was later appointed to the Royal Academy of Music's professorial staff as a vocal coach. Her past students included Dame Felicity Lott and winners of the Kathleen Ferrier Prize, the Royal Over-Seas League and the Young Welsh Singer of the Year.



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