

Music exam boards: an overview

Edward Maxwell

Love them, or loathe them, exams loom large in the lives of VMTs. There is usually an expectation from parents, school music departments and students themselves that music lessons will involve progressing through the grades. But which board do you use? Do you use the exams that you took as a child? Were you given a choice when you were learning, or were exams imposed on you by your teacher? Do you feel any particular loyalty to a board – if, for example, you studied at Trinity, might that influence you to follow Trinity exams?

For many years, I exclusively used ABRSM exams – that’s the board I grew up with myself, and I trained at one of the ‘Royal Schools’. I put my own choices and experiences above the differing needs of my students: I shoehorned every student into the exam syllabus, regardless of their suitability, and forced reluctant students to do Grade 5 theory because it was good for them, regardless of whether they actually wanted to do it. Conversely, there are some teachers who try to find the path of least resistance, taking shortcuts to get students through the grades as quickly as possible, while sometimes laying the flimsiest foundations in the process.

Meeting individual needs

Each student is unique, and you should be finding a course that most suits their individual needs, challenging them but setting them realistic targets. All the exam boards are equal in the eyes of Ofqual (the exam regulators), though you may well think that, to quote George Orwell, some are more equal than others. To ask which board is ‘easier’ or ‘harder’ is posing the wrong question. The question you should be asking is: which board offers the smoothest progression for each student? Remember that an exam syllabus is not the same as a curriculum. You should develop a bespoke curriculum for every student that’s far broader than a syllabus. If exams are snapshots of progress, your own curriculum should be like a story that follows a carefully thought-out and logical narrative. Your choice of exams should complement this curriculum, but not dictate it.

It’s vital that your student should be able to tackle every part of the exam with confidence. If, for example, they can’t play scales, don’t just enter them anyway and hope for the best. Many examiners report candidates arriving in the exam room having received little or no training in aural tests, with some not even being familiar with the test format. In truth, candidates will get some marks for attempting a section even if they get everything wrong, but it isn’t fair on them, or the examiner, if they’re not thoroughly prepared for every part of the exam. You may want to choose a board that offers a more flexible syllabus, so you can play to a student’s strengths and avoid some of their vulnerabilities – while still, of course, addressing these weaknesses in their lessons.

In recent years, and particularly over the last 18 months with the advent of remote exams, there have been more options to choose from than ever before. ‘Performance’ exams are now available, which dispense with scales, sightreading and aural tests. The danger is that unscrupulous teachers (and lazy students) will do likewise in their lessons and consequently adopt a less rigorous approach. On the other hand, isn’t a fluent performance the ultimate goal of a musician? Nobody goes to a concert to hear someone play scales or technical exercises (though admittedly I have sightread in concerts plenty of times).

There are five Ofqual-regulated boards, and this resource briefly summarises what they offer. While it may sound obvious, make sure you thoroughly read the syllabus. Put away any preconceived notions and look at the options with an open mind. The boards are listed in age order.

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Trinity College London (TCL)

The oldest board, Trinity College London (www.trinitycollege.com) was established in 1877 as the external exam board of Trinity College of Music. After a merger with Guildhall in 2004, it was briefly rebranded as Trinity Guildhall, though it reverted to Trinity in 2012. The board offers a wide range of qualifications in music, English, drama and dance. It assesses around 850,000 candidates a year in over 60 countries.

Classical and jazz grades

These offer a traditional syllabus from 'initial' to Grade 8: three pieces (four for singers), technical work, and flexibility of choice in the supporting tests. There's a wide range of pieces to choose from in each grade, and the onus is on the student to choose a balanced programme. There is also the option to substitute one piece for the student's own composition if it's comparable to the grade standard. Duets are allowed up to Grade 3, and backing tracks can be used to accompany all exams.

Each grade has instrument-specific technical exercises and a range of supporting tests consisting of:

- ▶ Scales
- ▶ Aural tests
- ▶ Sightreading
- ▶ Short studies (up to Grade 5), which focus on an aspect of technique or musicality
- ▶ Orchestral excerpts (Grade 6 and above)
- ▶ Improvisation
- ▶ Musical knowledge

There is flexibility in which you can take – for example, in the Grade 5 piano syllabus you can choose two options out of sightreading, aural, improvisation and musical knowledge, but scales and exercises are compulsory. For some other instruments you can opt out of scales and play exercises instead. So, for example, it's possible to pass all the grades on trumpet without playing a single scale. It should be noted that the improvisation needs to be based on a stylistic, motivic or harmonic stimulus provided by the examiner. Disregarding these and just playing some crazy jazz licks will not gain the candidate many marks.

Digital exams

Trinity's digital exams syllabus offers a video exam consisting of:

- ▶ Three pieces
- ▶ Technical exercises
- ▶ Scales or exercises (orchestral excerpts from Grade 6 upwards)

It's essentially the same as the regular exam syllabus but without the unseen elements such as sightreading and aural tests.

Diplomas

Trinity offers three levels of diploma – ATCL, LTCL and FTCL – in performance, teaching and theory. Digital diplomas are also available.

Rock and pop

Trinity's rock and pop exams (www.trinityrock.com) are in vocals, keyboard, guitar, bass and drums. Three songs are required, of which one can be an own choice or own composition. The third is a 'technical focus' song, which includes specific technical elements. The 'supporting test' element is called 'session skills', and gives a choice between 'playback,' which promotes reading and aural skills, or 'improvising', with both options performed to a backing track.

London College of Music Examinations (LCME)

LCME (<https://lcme.uwl.ac.uk>) was founded in 1887 and holds exams in music, drama, communication and creative media. It offers exams in the UK and overseas, and has a panel of around 90 examiners.

Grades

These go from 'Pre-Grade 1' to Grade 8, and follow a traditional format of pieces and supporting tests. The exams offer an extremely broad range of disciplines, ranging from orchestral instruments to church music, traditional Irish and Scottish music, pop vocals and even a DJ exam. Jazz grades are available in guitar, flute, piano, saxophone, trumpet and trombone. The requirements are:

- ▶ Three pieces (chosen from lists A, B or C)
- ▶ Technical work (including scales, though some instruments have the option of playing studies instead)
- ▶ Sightreading
- ▶ Aural tests
- ▶ Discussion (musical knowledge of the pieces)

Recital grades

These require the performance of four pieces. The candidate can opt to play a fifth piece, sightreading or discussion.

Leisure play

While an exam in 'leisure play' sounds like an oxymoron, this is essentially another 'performance' format, where the candidate plays three pieces from the repertoire list and one of their own choice. There are no supporting tests.

Digital exams

In addition to face-to-face exams, LCME offers the option to submit a recording of any exam, or to perform a live exam remotely.

Also on offer

Also on offer at LCME are:

- ▶ Performance and teaching diplomas
- ▶ Performance assessments (online and in person)
- ▶ Early learning exams (aimed at ages 3 to 6)

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM)

The ABRSM (<https://gb.abrsm.org>) was founded in 1889 and runs exams in 93 countries, examining over 650,000 candidates per year. ABRSM also offers professional development for teachers, and provides numerous useful apps and resources to complement its exams.

Practical exams

By far the most popular exams are the traditional practical exams up to Grade 8, with a preliminary 'initial' grade. All orchestral and band instruments are catered for, along with singing, musical theatre, piano, organ and harpsichord. The requirements are:

- ▶ Three pieces (chosen from lists A, B or C)
- ▶ Scales (or an additional piece for singers)
- ▶ Sightreading
- ▶ Aural tests

Jazz exams

ABRSM offers a jazz syllabus for selected instruments – piano, flute, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet and trombone – up to Grade 5, consisting of:

- ▶ Three pieces, each of which has an improvised section
- ▶ Scales and arpeggios
- ▶ Quick study, which involves either reading a phrase, or playing it by ear, followed by an improvised response

Performance exams

These are digital exams, in which four pieces are played – three from the syllabus and one of the student's own choice, presented as a continuous programme. There are no supporting tests.

Theory exams

ABRSM offers theory exams up to Grade 8 and is the only board that requires a pass at Grade 5 theory (or Grade 5 jazz or practical musicianship) in order to progress to practical or performance Grades 6 to 8.

Also on offer

Also on offer at ABRSM are:

- ▶ A range of post-Grade 8 diplomas (ASM, DipABRSM, LRSM, FRSM)
- ▶ Performance assessments
- ▶ Music medals
- ▶ Ensemble assessments
- ▶ Choral singing

Rockschool (RSL)

Founded in 1991, Rockscool (www.rslawards.com) was the first organisation to provide exam grades for rock and pop musicians. RSL awards a total of approximately 80,000 qualifications per year, across 45 countries, with a 50/50 split between UK and overseas candidates. There is a panel of over 100 examiners.

Contemporary graded exams

These cater for a number of rock and pop instruments – piano, keyboard, guitars, drums, vocals – and also include ukulele, music production and music theory. They are offered as face-to-face, live streamed or recorded exams. Grade exams go up to Grade 8, with two preliminary exams – ‘premiere’ and ‘debut’. The requirements are:

- ▶ Three pieces (two free-choice pieces can be played)
- ▶ Technical work
- ▶ Sightreading or improvisation and interpretation
- ▶ Ear tests comprising melodic and rhythmic recall

Performance certificate

Five pieces (which can include three free choices) with no supporting tests.

Classical grades

This is the newest addition to the RSL portfolio and currently offers a piano syllabus, with violin to follow soon. These follow the same format as the contemporary grades and performance certificate listed above.

Also on offer

Also on offer at Rockscool are:

- ▶ Diplomas (including Performance, Creative Enterprise and Teaching)
- ▶ Performance arts awards (including musical theatre)
- ▶ A range of vocational qualifications

Music Teachers' Board (MTB)

MTB (www.mtbexams.com) offers exclusively online exams and its first Ofqual-accredited graded exams were launched in March 2019. While other boards initially struggled to get online during the Covid pandemic, MTB was able to continue as normal and has expanded rapidly as a result. MTB currently has over 1,400 centres (the person or organisation making the entry) in more than 45 countries and has a panel of 65 examiners.

Exam recordings are submitted through the MTB app, with a choice of audio, if the exam is supervised by the teacher, or video, if not. There are no entry or submission deadlines – exams can be submitted at any time. MTB has lots of free resources available on its website – for example, all the supporting tests are downloadable for free.

Practical grades

These progress to Grade 8, with two preliminary grades, 'Pre-Grade Introductory' and 'Pre-Grade Higher'. In addition to piano, singing and the usual orchestral and band instruments, exams are offered in ukulele, soprano trombone and ocarina. The requirements are:

- ▶ Three pieces: a flexible choice taken from the MTB syllabus list, or any other exam board's syllabus. You can also select your own pieces, to be submitted to the board in advance for approval.
- ▶ Technical exercises.
- ▶ Scales: either played from memory or read from a sheet, the latter option requiring some rhythmic patterns and different articulations.
- ▶ Listening skills (aural tests), a recording of which is available from the MTB website. These require clapped and sung responses.
- ▶ Duet – an alternative to the listening skills. All duets are free to download from the website.
- ▶ Reading skills – a sheet of rhythmic exercises that need to be clapped along to a pre-recorded metronome click on the website.

Performance grades

These assess the ability to perform a recital programme of four or five pieces with a target duration and no supporting tests. The pieces can be chosen from the syllabus or an entirely own-choice programme can be performed.

Contemporary grades

These are available in drums, guitar and singing, and require four pieces and technical exercises.

Also on offer

Also on offer from MTB are:

- ▶ Diplomas (AMTB and LMTB)
- ▶ Jazz and theory exams are coming soon

Using exams wisely

Digital or face to face?

Performing live is the very essence of making music, and you may think that playing face to face to an audience (or an examiner) is an important experience for a student. However, while some students thrive under pressure, others crumble. There are plenty of candidates who come out of an exam room in tears, and for shy and nervous students a digital exam can be a welcome alternative. Generally, digital exams have to be recorded in one take, but if you're not happy with the outcome, you can re-record as many times as you like, removing a lot of pressure.

Choice of repertoire

With most of the boards publishing their own compilations of pieces, it's very tempting to encourage a student to buy just the one book containing all the pieces for the exam. This saves the parent money, but it's a false economy: it deprives a student of a broader repertoire that in the long run can slow down progress, because students are not exposed to continually changing technical and musical challenges.

Boards that include their own publications on their syllabus usually also offer options from other books, which can provide vital repertoire for a student to explore beyond the exam. If you do use only the board's book of exam pieces, students should try learning all the pieces and then choose their favourite.

I strongly believe that students should be learning new pieces all the time, and that exam pieces should be less than half of their overall repertoire. If a student has the necessary skills to attempt a particular grade, they should be able to sightread an exam piece fairly well, and it shouldn't take more than a term to learn an exam piece thoroughly. If they can't, the necessary skills should be built up with a high turnover of non-exam pieces until they can. So many students take a year to learn three pieces and never attempt any non-exam pieces.

Scales

There's a variety of approaches to scales. My favourite is cumulative scales, where each grade adds one or two new keys, and where you can be tested on any previous grades (this is used in the Trinity wind syllabus). This encourages an organised approach to teaching, gradually building up a reservoir of knowledge and discouraging a student from mistakenly thinking they can learn a bunch of scales the night before the exam and then instantly forget them afterwards. In some exams, you can take alternative options to scales, though this doesn't mean you should not still be teaching scales in lessons.

Aural tests

Confidence in aural tests is an important factor when choosing a board. There are several things to consider:

- ▶ A test that requires the ability to sing pitches will obviously be unsuitable for students who are unable to pitch notes, or for teenage boys who lack control over their voices.
- ▶ A shy candidate who's unwilling to engage in a general discussion about a piece of music may well fare better answering direct questions.
- ▶ ABRSM Grade 5 and above requires a general knowledge of 'style and period', something that may be completely unknown to a student who listens to no classical music.
- ▶ A student who plays a 'non-harmonising' instrument may struggle to name cadences, chords and modulations.

Accompaniments

There are, at the time of writing, temporary Covid measures in place by some boards allowing unaccompanied exams, though these are likely to be stopped soon. It's important to check on their websites for the latest information.

Only ABRSM requires a 'live' accompanist for exams, with the exception of their jazz exams, which permit a backing track. The other boards allow the use of backing tracks. Although a live accompaniment is always preferable, allowing the soloist to hear and interact with an accompanist and learn rehearsal techniques, a backing track does require the candidate to display more rhythmic discipline. Where possible, accompany students as much as possible in lessons and if you can't play the piano, improvise a duet part. Encourage them to play with backings at home – there's software available to alter the speed of playback (for example the ABRSM's Speedshifter app, <https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/speedshifter/>).

Examiners

Whichever board you choose, examiners are highly experienced and highly trained musicians and teachers, who have gone through further rigorous training to become an examiner. When entering a student, you're essentially asking for an objective assessment, yet so many teachers dismiss a result if it hasn't gone how they expected.

Out of hundreds of exams my students have entered over the years, even if I haven't always agreed with some of the examiners' comments, I've always found them to give valid and fair-minded critiques. Ironically, the only times I've wanted to complain have been when students are marked too generously, and I've felt that things I've said (for example, 'You won't get a good mark if you don't learn your scales') have been undermined by an over-generous result.

Only MTB offers instrumental specialists, though ABRSM has specialist jazz examiners, as does Trinity with its rock and pop exams. However, if you listen to a school concert, you can easily judge when a child is playing accurately and expressively, and when lapses of technique interfere with the musical flow, even if you can't play the instrument yourself. It should be remembered that examiners are working to strict criteria, which are published by the boards and are essential reading for teachers.

Marking

Marking schemes vary between the boards, and even their pass marks are different:

- ▶ Trinity: pass 60%, merit 75%, distinction 87%
- ▶ LCME: pass 65%, merit 75%, distinction 85%
- ▶ ABRSM (marked out of 150): pass 100 (67%), merit 120 (80%), distinction 130 (87%)
- ▶ RSL: pass 60%, merit 75%, distinction 90%
- ▶ MTB: pass 60%, merit 75%, distinction 87%

Individual pieces may receive a single mark, or may have it broken down into three categories: accuracy, technique and expression. Performance exams have an additional mark for general performance craft: how well the candidate creates a sense of occasion, communicates with the audience (or, at least, the video camera) and conveys a well-paced and coherent overall performance.

Exams' limitations

As previously mentioned, an exam is only a snapshot, and it doesn't give any deep insight into a student's standard. In academic exams, there's a massive gulf between a student who achieves A* and one who scrapes through with E. Likewise, a student who achieves a high distinction at Grade 8 is likely to be in a completely different league to a candidate who scrapes the pass mark, yet they end up with the same qualification.

A pass mark to one candidate may, however, be more meaningful, and represent more effort, than a distinction received by a student who excels at everything. Ultimately all an exam gives you is a piece of paper. This is not to devalue the hard work and achievement that has gone into an exam pass, but this is not the be-all and end-all of anyone's musical journey. It is merely a milestone along the way.

You can go to music college, join an orchestra or be a professional musician without having taken a single exam. What counts is the skill set you have built up: the training you should be giving your students will be opening doors to the joys of making music in a wider context. None of my own memorable musical experiences involved taking an exam. Instead, all were connected to playing music with like-minded people.

If you've coached a student to pass Grade 8 but haven't given them any independent skills to enjoy making music when they stop lessons, you have failed them badly. An amateur orchestra may advertise for players 'Grade 6 and above standard', but this is no guarantee that you'll pass the audition even if you have a Grade 8 certificate – you might not have the necessary reading, pitching or rhythmic skills to cope. And if a pianist isn't able to pick up an easy book of Christmas carols on the piano and accompany a spontaneous seasonal singsong, what have their lessons actually achieved?

When used wisely, however, music exams can provide short- and long-term targets, and give students motivation and a great sense of achievement when they achieve their goals. Have a look at the websites and even if you do not use one particular board, you'll find lots of resources and perhaps get fresh ideas for your teaching.