
Correspondence

Music examinations: all change, please!

For seventy years of my life I have been a supporter of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music examinations: first as a pupil, going through Grades 1–8, and then the L.R.A.M., and then as a teacher, guiding my pupils through the grades and stopping at the diploma. So I have had many, many opportunities of evaluating the work of the examinations, and to a lesser extent those of Trinity College of Music, theirs appearing less frequently. What strikes me – after probing in my memories – is how little they have changed! Surely some new thoughts should peep through the pages!

Let us take Grade 2 broken chords, disliked by every one of my pupils and by me. Well do I remember playing them (it would be in 1913) and hating them. How illogical it is to teach one set of broken chords for Grade 1, and then another set for Grade 2, changing all the fingering and then starting on another variation, the arpeggios, in Grade 3. Can't we cut one out? At the advanced end, Grade 7 requires 175 different forms of scale and arpeggio and Grade 8, 272, give or take a few. This is a terrifying amount to prepare, especially when the average child is also coping with 'O' and 'A' Levels. True, they must know the 12 Major and Minor (both Harmonic and Melodic), but need they at pre-diploma stage do them in thirds, sixths, tenths, etc.? The time would be better spent on more varied technical exercises, as found in Hanon.

Sight-reading is another vexed question. We are told by all the experts that sight-reading should be part of every lesson and practice period. Have the experts *played* the pieces they set? Even the Grade 1 examples are dull, and it does not improve as we go up the grades. Who would want to be able to read such pieces in an everyday context, such as accompanying the school choir or small instrumental groups? Trinity College, London, do it much better. Their pieces have titles and are musically intelligible. Have we not progressed since the days when I wept over my dreary sight-reading?

Theory next: the papers are harder than when I laboured over them, but the pattern is the same. The format of the small books for practising examples is particularly antiquated. The best actual paper is the Grade 6, which *for the first time* indicates that

there is some connection between music and theory. Why not incorporate such a question or two in the earlier grades? Better still, why not cut out Grades 1, 2, 3 and 4 and use that splendid set of examinations, the General Musicianship ones, which in my view are not used as much as they should be. Indeed, I have met teachers who have never heard of them. They would be applicable for *any* instrument if a change was made in (a) i, ii, iii, in that there was an alternative for every other musician than pianists. Another splendid examination which does not receive its fair share of entrants is the Chamber Music section. Could not this be widened to include recorders – a down-trodden lot as far as the Associated Board is concerned, although they produce some really beautiful consorts. Trinity College again score here.

Finally, please Mr Examiner, while agreeing that we want to introduce our pupils to music of many styles and periods, must they be so dull? Take Grade 5 (apart from the Mozart). Well, really! Two pieces in 6/8 time in *one* list – and need they choose two of the least interesting in the Anthology, leaving out so many attractive to young ears? As well, the technical problems of the music within the grades is not always well balanced. In Grade 4 recently, for example, there was some pretty heavy going in the Handel *Gigue*, but the Burgmüller, on the other hand, was very successful, giving plenty of scope for imagination and some nice technical problems: above all, it was *likeable*. Many children have to be helped to appreciate the modern idiom (as do a lot of adults!) and we can only applaud the introduction of some twentieth-century music. Some of the Bartók (the *Round Dance*, Grade 3; *Children at Play*, Grade 2) and the delightful *Echoes* (Grade 1) by David Stewart, and *Clowns* by Kabalevsky (Grade 3) were winners. But a further thought would be to widen the syllabus by letting the candidate choose any piece from any section of the appropriate grade, give reasons for their choice and answering a few questions on the composer and style of music. A similar item is used, I believe, in the Australian music examination syllabus. Too many children only know the music they have learnt for examinations and have no background knowledge, historical or musical, of what they have learnt. We realize that the highly gifted child will attain success anyway, and for them the examinations do not matter very much. But if the Associated Board examinations are to continue – and expense is coming to be a major factor in this – they have to be a more enticing target for the average child. The latter is going to make the audience of the future, the amateur choral singer, orchestral and quartet player. Such children need a few ladders to climb that they will *enjoy*. There are so many other activities in schools today competing with music for their attention. We shall have a better chance of holding on to our pupils and persuading them to achieve through their examinations if the diet we set is more palatable in some areas and less demanding in others.

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