Performance exams

VMT

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Introduction

Imagine a student said to you: 'I don't want to do grade exams any more – I just want to play for fun.' What would your reaction be? Would you be happy that they just wanted to carry on playing? Would you be worried that they were going to stop practising and then stop altogether? Or would you reflect not on the student but also on your own teaching – when did it stop being fun?

In our current climate, the value of music education is constantly being questioned. We defend our corner by reeling off the benefits of learning an instrument: increased self-worth, boosted mental health, a sense of belonging and enjoyment. But is it possible to achieve these things if the learning isn't fun?

One of the great joys of teaching is watching students progress and grow while they are very obviously enjoying themselves. Of course, getting a distinction in an exam can be hugely satisfying and rewarding, but does the outcome justify the means? A common reaction at the end of an exam is: 'I'm glad it's over.' Is that why we play music – to look forward to when it's finished? Maybe we want to get UCAS points; maybe we just want to play an F sharp melodic minor scale perfectly across three octaves. Maybe we revel in singing back a tune, when most people would have forgotten how it starts by the time it finishes. Or maybe teachers like exams so that they can brag about their students' results on social media.

As with so many things in life, we're guided by our own experiences. As professional musicians, we have probably shared a similar path of success during the formative years of our development. It's highly likely that we were thought of as 'successful' musicians, even if that was at a school or local level, and for most us who were brought up in the UK, I would hazard a guess that meant doing music exams, most probably ABRSM, and doing well in them. Later in life, as we start to inspire the next generation, we attempt to mirror our teachers and mentors. We try to forge a path for our students from their first exam to that gold standard of musical achievement – Grade 8.

Another often quoted reason to teach is to enable our students to develop a lifelong love of performing music. For every professional musician who puts their success down to hard work and a dedication to scale practice, there are probably hundreds of potential musicians who gave up because they hated learning scales. In them, we've successfully cultivated a lifelong animosity towards performing music.

There are lots of cultures that don't do music exams. Most Americans, for example, are thoroughly confused by UK-based grades. Although other countries have systems of exams, we in the UK seem to be obsessed by them. Of course, some teachers may not enter their students for exams. The cost involved can make them prohibitive for many students, but the prevailing culture in the UK seems to be about obtaining qualifications. In musical contexts, children seem to be constantly asked: 'What grade are you?' It's useful, of course, to know the standard of students (for streaming in an orchestra, for example) and students gain pride as their certificates are handed out in school assemblies – they get that sense of achievement that we desire.

But do the benefits of doing music exams outweigh the drawbacks? Without exams, we need to give our students goals of solo and ensemble public performance. Particularly in the current pandemic-influenced climate, these opportunities can be few and far between. Although I never again want my students to be judged and marked on how well they play a C sharp minor scale, or recognise a modulation, or sightread, I do feel that there is a need (as do most parents) for some goal-orientated structure to my teaching. I still feel a little queasy about my students being given a mark for sharing their music, but I can live with that if it's the best of an imperfect system. It's a compromise, but I think it's a good one: performance exams.

Full disclosure: I'm a brass teacher. I teach all brass at junior school level and just the French horn at senior school level and above. I have no experience of Rockschool exams or vocal teaching. I will be referring to the instrumental exams of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College London (Trinity), London College of Music (LCM) and Music Teachers' Board (MTB).

Traditional face-to-face instrumental exams

Traditional face-to-face examinations have dominated the UK's instrumental music education scene for years, so they need little explaining. They provide a syllabus that enables graded progression through a musician's development. Are they suitable for all music students? I would argue that they're not. Are great musicians the product of these exams? My answer would be, only if they're supported by great teachers.

But great teachers do not have a set syllabus that they teach to every child. They recognise each student as an individual and tailor each lesson to that student's (or in some cases, group of students') needs. So why do we insist on a 'one-size-fits-all' method of assessment?

Here's what face-to-face exams entail for the ABRSM and Trinity:

ABRSM

- Three pieces
- Scales
- Sightreading
- Aural tests

Trinity

- Three pieces
- Technical work
- Two supporting tests

The much-revered ABRSM exams have very little flexibility. Students are required to perform the standard three supporting tests (a rigid structure mirrored by LCM). Trinity exams offer far greater options in their exams. On many instruments, for example, there's an alternative to scales from memory (a flexible system mirrored by MTB).

Although supporting tests (scales, aural, sightreading, etc) provide a decent syllabus for many music students, should we actually be examined on them? When offering an accessible and inclusive musical education, shouldn't we consider the drawbacks of traditional exams and ask if we should be making our student learn these set skills?

Of course, professional musicians (a tiny percentage of all musicians) will have spent hours practising their scales and developing great listening skills. As recording session contractors will tell you, British musicians are the best sightreaders in the world – which may be a reflection of the fact that we were all made to do it for exams. That's obviously great news for elite musicians, but how many instrumentalists did we lose along the way?

Drawbacks of the supporting tests in traditional exams

- Scales and aural tests learnt in isolation from music leave the student with a lack of understanding about why they're learning them.
- Learning scales in keys unrelated to any repertoire can make them a joyless academic exercise.
- Many of us consider ourselves compassionate teachers: positive, encouraging, always looking for the small successes. But it's very difficult to ignore the fact that a scale or aural test, particularly for examination purposes, is simply right or wrong, good or bad. The student will be aware of this as well.
- Many students find scales from memory excruciatingly hard, and will often enter an exam room knowing that they're going to get something 'wrong'. Anything a teacher says about 'enjoying yourself' or 'not worrying about mistakes' cannot override a the feeling that something is going to go badly.
- If we start lessons with these scales in isolation, often the clouds of 'not enough practice on scales' can darken the entire session. Aiming for 'right' over 'wrong', getting our head stuck in note names and strange key signatures sets the wrong mindset for the lesson.
- Should any student really be doing 'extra aural lessons' just to pass an exam? Exam boards claim that aural tests are just an extension of work done in lessons, but can anyone honestly say they don't specifically practise them?
- It's extremely rare in the real world to have to sightread something perfectly first time. Even in a recording studio, the first take is generally ditched. Being examined on how you play something for the very first time is an unrealistic snapshot of a student's musicianship.
- Chasing qualifications pulls us away from the reasons to play music – sharing, performance, joy and expression.

Performance exams (face-to-face or digital)

Performance exams do just what their name suggests – students are examined on a performance. Generally students play just a selection of pieces from a syllabus (although some boards allow for students' own choice of repertoire) in a short recital. Since there are no elements that require an examiner's live interaction (taking aural tests, giving sightreading or selecting scales, for example), these are mostly recorded exams. As long as you have a phone, tablet or video camera, they give you great flexibility in terms of when and where you do the exam.

Each board offers a different option:

- **ABRSM Digital Performance Grade:** four pieces (entrants still have to have passed ABRSM Grade 5 (or above) in Music Theory or Practical Musicianship, or a practical grade solo jazz subject, to do Grade 6 and above).
- **MTB Digital Performance Grade:** four or five pieces with a total target duration.
- **LCM Recital Grade:** four or five pieces (with an option of sightreading or discussion instead of a fifth piece).
- **Trinity Digital Grade:** not a performance grade, exactly, but a recorded exam requiring three pieces and technical work (although for most subjects this can be exercises or excerpts from written music, rather than scales from memory).

Each board has its pros and cons, as with standard face-to-face exams, but those relative advantages and disadvantages will depend on individual teachers' and students' situations and choices, and are too lengthy to discuss in detail here.

Other exams that may be worth investigating are ABRSM's Performance Assessments (useful for candidates with specific needs wanting constructive feedback), Trinity's Music Certificate exams, and LCM's Leisure Play or Performance awards.

How to create your own syllabus

For teachers who have followed similar exam board requirements for years, setting your own syllabus might seem like a lot of work. At the beginning, it will certainly be more time-consuming, because you'll have to put fresh thought into your delivery as you take more responsibility for your students' development. With a little perseverance, however, what will hopefully emerge is a much more organic way of teaching, one that will repay the initial extra workload.

First, think about what technical aspects are important for your instrument – for example, scales or certain aural skills. Then consider which pieces of repertoire you'll use with your students, and lastly how you'll extract those technical elements from that repertoire.

Remember that your students are never going to be tested on these skills – they are only being practised to aid musical performance. Think about how you want your students to perform. I encourage my students to be relaxed in sharing their music with others, thereby sharing the joy they get from playing with whoever's lucky enough to be listening. Always start the lesson with that same attitude – joyful sharing – and there will be no sudden psychological gear-change when it comes to performance.

Around 75 to 100% of your teaching (and students' practice time) can be based around repertoire. Find pieces that engage each student. Most teachers already treat students as individuals when learning pieces. Your style of teaching pieces does not have to change if you switch to performance exams, but you'll need to consider how to ensure technique is not forgotten.

I often start my lessons by taking the student's sheet music and putting it on my music stand. After a quick scan, I'll initiate some games and exercises around the piece before moving to work directly on the piece. The only diversion from this is when we recognise an element as a 'continuous skill' – more on this below.

Technical work

Scales and arpeggios

Find the key of your piece, then spend time getting comfortable in that key – in other words, playing the key's scale and arpeggio. There may be more than one key to learn if the piece modulates (thereby offering a valuable way to understand modulation from the inside).

You won't need to use the threat of a bad mark in an exam as a motivation to learn scales. Instead, in the lesson, take as much time as you need to learn the scale. If the student wants more 'piece time', they need to practise the scale!

Aural skills

Without an exam syllabus, aural skills can be specific to your student's instrument. Brass players need good pitching skills, so singing and interval work are very useful. Think about what your students need. If they're struggling with pulse, get them to count the beats as you play, and then swap roles. Be proactive: before you start playing a piece, do an exercise on an element the student finds consistently tricky.

We have to teach our students to listen attentively. Our natural instinct is to demonstrate to the best of our ability, but intentionally playing at a sub-optimal level and getting the student to listen and comment is an excellent, and fun, exercise.

Sightreading

On a first play though when sightreading, give your student permission to make as many mistakes as they like. They should play with abandon! The vital element, however, is working out how to improve after that first play through. That opens the door to great development for a musician: the student can learn to listen as they play, and also evaluate and problem solve. If you give a student the key to allow them to unlock this themselves, that's your job as a teacher as good as done.

Think of sightreading as a by-product of understanding music. Help your students to understand and their sightreading will flourish.

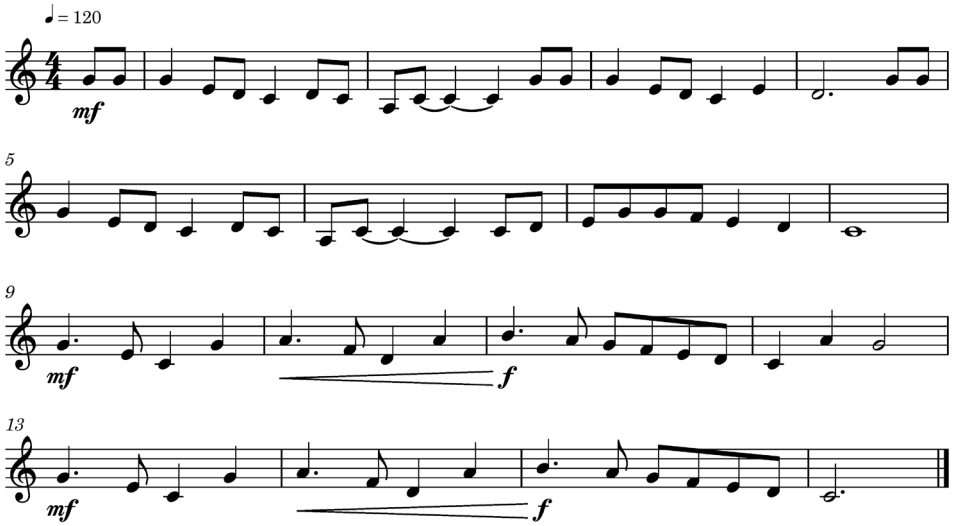
Musical knowledge (and music theory)

Make sure your students understand every musical direction on the page. The danger of basing musical knowledge on repertoire is that the knowledge can be quite narrow. It's therefore vital to give the students a range of pieces to play: different speeds, time signatures, keys, styles, and so on.

Improvisation
This is a great skill, but any improvisation must be carried out without any judgment whatsoever. Try playing answering phrases based on the key and style of the piece you're studying.

Instrument-specific skills
Use the freedom from exams to explore different skills relevant to your instrument. I work on 'lip flexibility' exercises and long notes with all my students. These skills may not be found directly in repertoire, so often fall into the 'continuous skills' bracket.

'Give Me Joy in my Heart' (Grade 1)

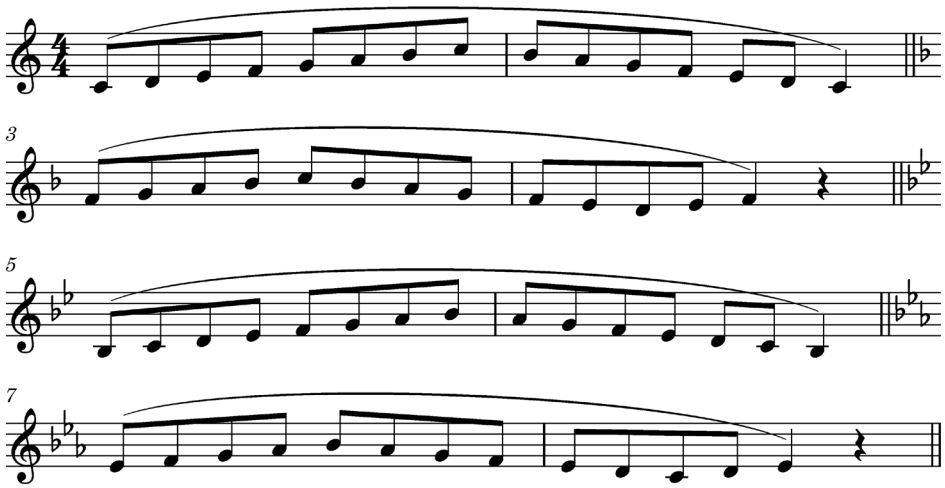


This is a Grade 1 level piece for brass instruments. Here are some ways of extracting technical work from this piece:

- **Theory:** find that the piece is in C major.
- **Long note:** the student plays a long C as the teacher plays some of the tune.
- **Scale:** practise the scale of C major using the tempo and main articulation of the piece (ie tongued crotchets at 120 bpm) and then look for where bits of it appear in the piece.
- **Arpeggio:** the teacher plays the last two bars and holds the last note while student plays the arpeggio.
- **Aural skills:** the teacher plays the tonic, and the student finds a way of pitching the first note (by interval, scale or arpeggio).
- **Improvisation:** the student improvises answering phrases using the opening two-bar rhythm on any notes.
- **Aural skills:** the student claps, counts beats or conducts as the teacher plays.
- **Sightreading:** try bars 9 and 10 for the first time as sightreading. Help the student to identify areas to improve and, after a short practice, try again.

Continuous skills

Once a skill is learnt, hopefully within the context of a musical piece, a teacher may identify it as something they don't want a student to lose – scales are a good example. Generally the first scale that I cover with my students is C major, and as we gradually add sharps or flats we don't want to forget the earlier keys. We can devise an exercise taking us through these early keys. Because we're not tied to exam boards, we don't have to follow a strict system of learning scales from tonic to tonic. We can learn scales in different patterns so that we keep within the student's range, as shown in this example of scales in flat keys (for use up to Grade 3):



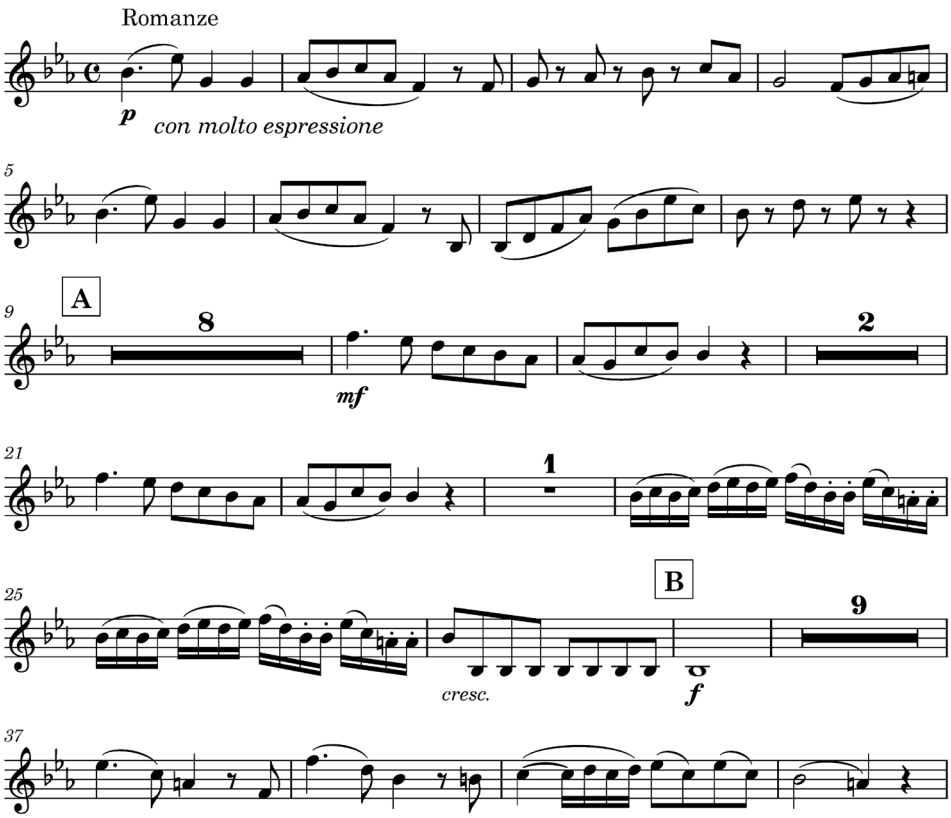
Similarly, rather than learning a list of Italian terms, we could get a student to keep a list of words they've learnt in their pieces to gradually build up a bank of knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, there may be some useful skills that aren't found directly in repertoire. For brass players, 'lip flexibility' exercises come under this category. I start by teaching these as what I call a 'Doo-ee-oo game'(a simple slurred C-G-C phrase, the 'oo' and the 'ee' encouraging tongue movement), an exercise that continues until the very end of any student's brass playing career! The complexity changes, of course, but the basic idea is constant.

I change what I call my continuous skills as a pupil progresses:

- Beginner: Games (eg 'Doo-ee-oo game')
- Intermediate: Warm-up (eg 'Scales in flat keys')
- Advanced: Warm-up and drills/exercises

Second movement of Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 3 (Grade 5 example)



Now that my student is at a Grade 5 level, hopefully they will have developed a warm-up incorporating some key skills, allowing us to focus on more complex features of our piece. This is just a development of the exercises that we did for Grade 1. By now your student should feel comfortable working this way, and as long as you're creative and vary the exercise, progress should be fun. For example:

- If we already have a grip on E flat major, we can work on more interesting scale patterns in that key. Use the same variety of rhythms, articulations and dynamics that appear in the piece.

- Mimic the phrasing needed in the piece when practising arpeggios. Use varied dynamics (but particularly crescendos as you ascend) to get the student to think about volume and phrasing before they start the piece itself.

- We can look at the key from bar 37. Why do A naturals appear on strong beats. Have we changed key? Can we play the scale in this new key? How is it related to the old key? We are now starting to understand modulations.

Learning to perform

One of the greatest gifts we can give our students is the ability to perform. This is a skill that's vital to success in later life in many professions. Unfortunately, many music students never gain the ability to perform freely and without anxiety. I'm convinced this is connected with the way we've traditionally trained them to perform in exams.

The final lessons leading up to traditional exams can be fraught: trying to get scales right that should have been practised weeks earlier, or panicking about the fact that sightreading is poor. And just as things are unravelling, we give unrealistic advice such as 'Enjoy yourself'!

Conversely, as performance exams approach we can taper down technical work and focus on musical storytelling. We can focus on sharing our music without worry, and just expressing ourselves. Although it is an exam, we can still view it as a performance, which is something far more enjoyable than any test.