

On Exams

Practical exam season is upon us and we would like to wish all of our candidates for this session the best of luck in their final preparations. It may be worthwhile at this time to reflect on the nature and value of music exams in the Classical music education environment.

The primary function that these exams fill is providing a framework of firm medium term goals without which the long time horizon of learning music may seem an endless expanse. As such these exams should be seen as a chance to look back at and apply what has been learnt and achieved rather than an end in itself.

Secondly, playing exams offers an opportunity to showcase your skills in front of a genuinely independent third party who has no particular vested interest in reporting only the good. This unbiased opinion can be invaluable in establishing clear and meaningful milestones in the path of development.

Finally, music exams offer the chance to focus on technical elements like scales and aural training that can very easily fall by the wayside in the absence of such structure and can be very difficult and disheartening to pick up at a later stage of development. These ancillary skills often make the difference between a mediocre and a good amateur musician.

At the same time music exams are not without their flaws. Chief among these is the simple fact that the examiner has very little real time to examine the deep technical aspects of a student's playing, so the testing is necessarily at a very superficial level both of musicality and technique. This can mean that a student who has an unusual (or indeed especially insightful) sense of phrasing or musicality, what separates the great from the good, can be severely penalised on occasion. From a technical point of view the superficial nature of examinations can result in technical "shortcuts" being rewarded because it sounds better now, even if it will result in a worse product later. From a teacher's point of view this can be highly problematic because technical shortcuts cause enormous problems later on that may undo whatever was gained in musical training.

Music exams should be seen as a minimum, not an end in itself. Although everyone loves receiving a shiny certificate to celebrate their achievements it is hard to say that having a distinction in grade 5 piano means anything much in the greater scheme of things. Even a grade 8 certificate only shows that one has successfully learnt the basic techniques of playing the instrument and not much besides.

With this in mind it is very important that one approaches the music exam as theatre, and not as an exam. In a sense it is a show, much like a stage performance of a play, and part of that show is some scenes with pieces, some with scales and some with aural training. Examiners will almost invariably mark based on their enjoyment of the performance as a whole, despite the marks being sub-divided into categories.

At the same time music lessons are not about putting on a good show in exam situations, they ultimately about learning to play and master music, which is at once a more specialised discipline and a much broader field of study.