

Music Exams (1)

The theme for the next couple of month's newsletters will be: "How to prepare for and succeed in music exams".

Music exams in general tend to employ a rubric system of marking, a system which can be effective in objectifying subjective subjects. A rubric, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring academic papers, projects, or tests". For ABRSM exams, the specific criteria are as follows:

- Accuracy, control and fluency
- Tonal awareness
- Musical character and sense of performance

(see more details at <http://www.abrsm.org/en/exams/examcriteria>)

As a rough guide, students who playing accurately with continuity and fluency can expect to at least pass the exams. Displaying some tonal awareness such as the ability to shape of phrases and control dynamics (loud and soft playing) is enough to earn a merit, but to earn a distinction one must also display the musical character and perform the music, rather than just play it.

On the surface this seems like a commonsense scheme, and it certainly does make marking more objective. Unfortunately there are also some unintended consequences which accompany the system.

Firstly, from a student's perspective the progress is not as linear as it may appear. The first step in learning a piece of music is usually to establish the notes one hundred percent correctly and accurately. Next one can add the inflections and dynamics which make the piece so much more effective, however doing so makes playing all the notes correctly and accurately somewhat more difficult. Similarly, and to a much greater extent, adding drama and characteristic performance to a piece make it much harder to play every note correctly. The result is that the development process is not linear; the piece can often become worse with more practice, a not infrequently observed phenomenon. The best way to combat this is to stop playing the piece (or at least practicing it deliberately) a few months before the exam for a month or so, allowing the final steps of practicing to recommence afresh. The key here is that this means that it is all but impossible to "cram" for a music exam in the way one could do for something like a history exam. This is certainly a positive consequence of this type of rubric, but the next is not.

A second consequence of this style of rubric is that it can be thwarted by stylistic and interpretive issues. It is hard to see, for example, how an examiner can objectively approach a highly idiosyncratic performance like one by Glen Gould (e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MVZfLReo0>)

What happens in practice is that inevitably examiners bring their own set of prejudices on style to an examination, and one examiner may merely pass someone who may have received a distinction from a different examiner. This tendency forces a rather conservative style of exam candidates, conditions under which not candidates would perform equally well.

The third point is that one may observe that no mention is made of technical proficiency. This makes sense when one considers that there is no one correct technique for playing an instrument. However, it does open up the possibility of adopting technical shortcuts which are extremely effective in the short run but require large technical changes later on in the student's development. One example of this is where pianists are taught music effectively off by heart, virtually foregoing the chance of a good mark in the sight reading section.

Unfortunately all such strategies have a very negative long term impact, using the above example it will become apparent at grade five or six level that the note reading is not up to par. In these cases it is virtually unheard of for a student to go back and correct fundamental errors, most just give up there and then, something which is completely unnecessary and avoidable.

It is unfortunately the case that many examiners, when faced with a candidate who can express the musical character well enough and deliver a successful performance with a minimum of obvious note mistakes can get the highest marks in a particular exam, even if technical deficiencies are so severe that further development is virtually entirely precluded, possibly on a permanent basis due to the motivational issues cited earlier.

It is important, therefore, to see music exams as processes and not goals in themselves. Achieving a distinction is certainly great feat and always the result of hard work, but ultimately if it is a question of getting a lower mark for being on a sounder technical footing or a higher one by ignoring fundamental technical and theoretical milestones one should always opt for the former. Similarly, one must have enough confidence in ones style and interpretation that a dissenting examiner giving an apparently wildly inaccurate mark does not have a hugely negative impact.

Ultimately, if there is a shortcut to long term success and maximum benefit from music examinations it is this: Practice, practice and more practice, but also practice with feeling and, most importantly, understanding.