

Music Exams (2)

<http://youtu.be/8OzM5yeb8Lc>

Last month I discussed the criteria for the exam pieces which form the main body of the ABRSM exams. In the next few months I will talk about the other three sections of the practical exams: Scales, Sight Reading and Aural tests because although these tests comprise only 40% of the exam and often an even smaller proportion of the lesson time they are no less important than pieces for getting a good result.

The first, and arguably most important of these tests, is scales. The importance of practising and mastering scales cannot be overstated, in that they provide the backbone of technique for any instrument. One way to think of it is to consider music as a mechanical series of steps and leaps and then recognize that the most efficient way to ensure that all of these actions can be performed accurately and fluently in various combinations is to practise scales. The other, equally important, rationale for scale practise is that they help establish and reinforce the understanding of keys and chord structures.

Simply put, practising scales makes everything else you do in music easier and greatly enhances the enjoyment that can be gained by playing a musical instrument. Given this, there is only one truly acceptable mark for the scale section: 100%. And there is only one way to achieve this mark: Practise. Unfortunately examiners can be extremely harsh in marking scales, and they require that scales be not only mechanically and theoretically perfect (i.e. the right notes played well), but also that the scales have a pleasing musical shape. Scales should therefore be played in exams as if they are pieces in themselves.

This way of marking is actually somewhat problematic from a teacher's technical perspective, because it allows students to "fake" good technique by employing technical shortcuts. A good examiner will pick up such habits and punish them severely, but this is not guaranteed, especially in less common instruments (i.e. instruments other than piano and possibly violin). Technical shortcuts are always problematic in the long term though and can lead to severe disappointment if a student later decides to carry on their studies to higher grades or even tertiary and/or professional levels only to discover that they need to relearn their technique from scratch.

Students, therefore, should practise scales for their own benefit, not merely for the sake of exams. Technical exercises rarely produces immediate tangible results, but typically after a year or so of diligent work it really starts to show in general playing and then becomes enjoyable in their own right.

Remember: Scales are only hard to practise if you haven't practised them...