

Music Exams (3)

Aural tests are often afforded the least attention in the preparation for exams. There are two reasons for this, which I will call the good news and the bad news.

First, the good news:

Aural tests are fairly straightforward in comparison to the rest of the exam. There is typically only one correct answer for each question, so there is little or no need to “editorialise”. What’s more, the answers can often literally be guessed on the basis of existing knowledge. Even better, aural ability is something that very readily responds to even a very small amount of training. It is even possible to practice this by oneself at home using tools such as this:

<http://youtu.be/dHTpAPX3ysw>

Overall, then, aural tests are hard to fail, but hard to get a really good mark in too. It is important to spend at least some time on them in the lesson closer to exam time, as the extra marks from even a little practice can be invaluable.

The bad news is that aural tests are a throwback to the now widely disregarded (if not disparaged) phenomenalist school of music philosophy. The basic idea behind this school of thought is that music is comprised of certain sound parameters (such as pitch, loudness, attack, interval and rhythm) and that, in order to be a competent musician, one has to be able to clearly perceive each of these elements.

From a philosophical standpoint this is problematic because music is not actually comprised of these sound parameters, but rather of the musical effect which they create. It is far from clear how the perception and naming of sound parameters has a direct and measurable impact on the perception of music as such.

It isn’t exactly clear, for example, how being able to correctly name a perfect fifth (for example) outside of a musical context has any bearing on the ability to actually correctly perceive and contextualise the effect that a perfect fifth has in a piece of music.

Much like I.Q. tests, these tests typically test for something that only has a real significance on music perception if there is a significant deficiency, something certainly which is not the case for the overwhelming majority of students.

They do form a part of the knowledge that every well educated musician should have though, but the payoff is so distant and so abstract that most teachers are understandably loathe to devote too much time on something that has so little direct bearing on the musical product here and now.

Having said all that...

ABRSM methodology does focus more on the musical side of training as well as having a marked penchant for singing at sight. Sight singing is a very useful skill for musicians, but for those without a natural ability to do it easily it can be a fairly difficult skill to pick up. Because of the amount of training required to get really good at it in return for a paltry few marks in the grand scheme of things it is unfortunately *this* section which teachers often decide to forego, opting instead to focus on more obviously valuable marks available elsewhere.

This is certainly not an ideal state of affairs, but the solution awaits a more systematic philosophical treatment, the solution to which is not immediately obvious. Yet aural tests will remain in exams because being able to distinguish musical elements clearly is something that musicians should be able to do to some extent, even if testing for it leaves a whole lot to be desired in practice.