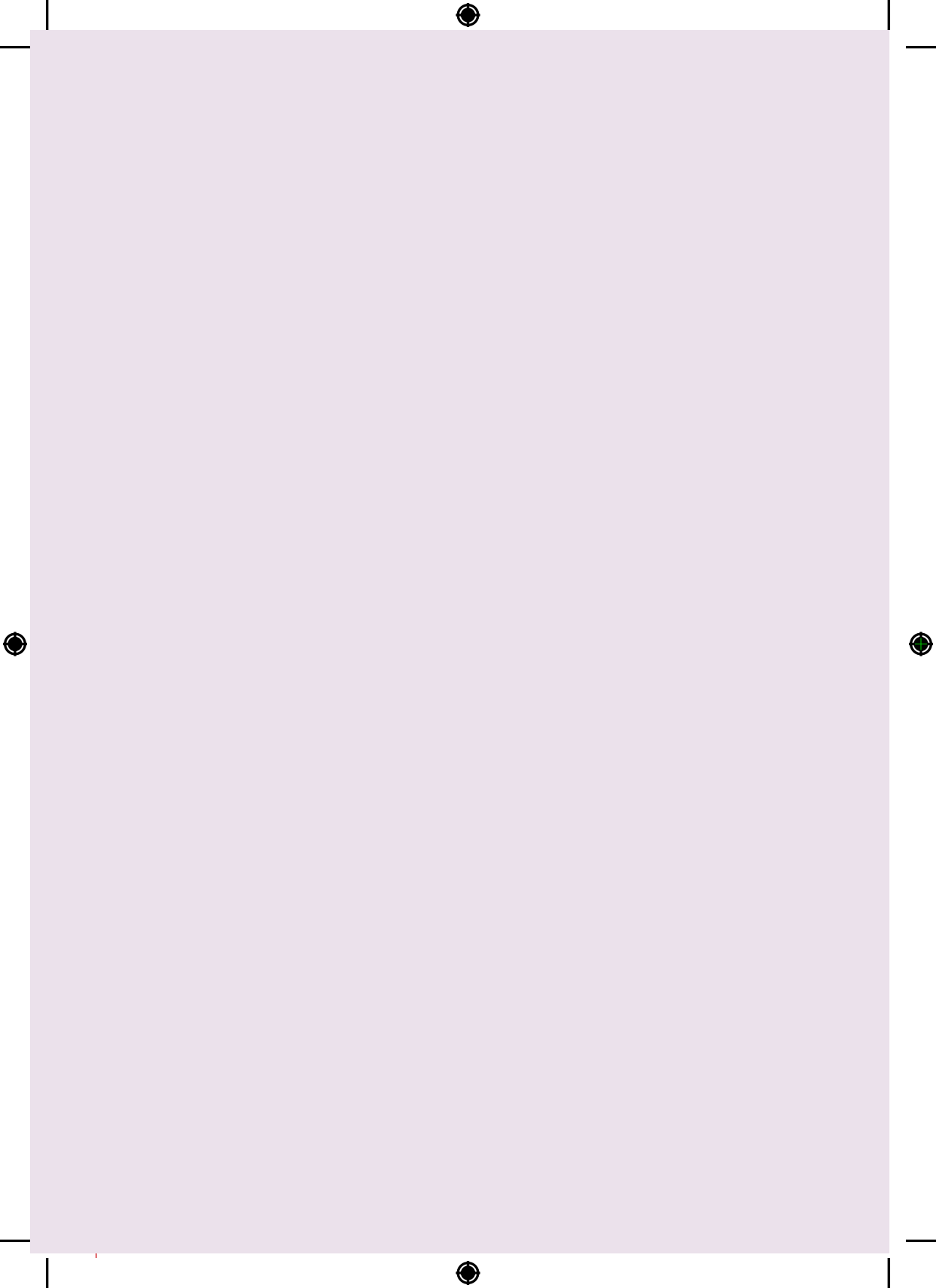


Your guide to ABRSM music exams

Instruments and Singing: Grades 1 to 8





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This guide gives an overview of our graded exams for instruments and singing. You can find detailed information about exam requirements at www.abrsm.org/exams.

The guide also refers to our Music Theory, Practical Musicianship and Jazz exams. You can find information about these exams on page 30 and at www.abrsm.org/exams.

Introduction

This guide is for anyone involved with ABRSM's graded music exams – especially teachers, candidates and parents. It introduces the various elements of our exams for instruments and singing, guides you through the exam experience and explains what makes ABRSM exams special.

As ABRSM's Chief Examiner, I lead the team of examiners who deliver our exams around the world. Our message to candidates is 'I'll do my best to help you do your best', and I can say with confidence that this message lies at the heart of our work.

Every examiner understands how it feels to be nervous before a musical performance. We have all experienced this ourselves and we remember being an exam candidate too. We know that a friendly face and a sympathetic approach make all the difference. From our manner in the exam room, our method as we work through the exam to our comments on the mark form, our aim is to be helpful and supportive. The ABRSM examiner is always on the candidate's side.

ABRSM exams motivate achievement and support progression. They lay good foundations for music making while encouraging students to reach their full potential, though we advise teachers and candidates to use our exams as a means to this end, rather than as an end in themselves. They can form only part of a musical curriculum, for which they provide goals and recognition along the way.

Finally, we should remember the reason so many of us learn to play an instrument or to sing. It's about a love of music and the enjoyment and fulfilment that brings, all of which ABRSM supports wholeheartedly.

John Holmes
Chief Examiner

About our exams

We have designed our graded music exams to motivate instrumental and singing students of all ages and a wide range of abilities.

Our exams are available at eight levels – Grades 1 to 8 – and provide:

- progressive goals to aim for;
- recognition for achievement;
- carefully structured syllabus requirements;
- one-to-one assessment by an expert professional;
- an objective guide to a candidate's skills and progress.

There are no age restrictions and students can start with any grade or skip grades if they want to.

All-round musicianship

We believe in the importance of all-round musicianship and this forms the basis of our exams. To become an all-round musician, students need a range of interlocking skills – in performance, technique, notation, and listening and musical perception – as well as knowledge, understanding and creativity. These are the things we assess in our exams.

To succeed in our exams candidates need to have a combination of skills and understanding. Broadly, we assess:

- performance skills through pieces or songs;
- technical skills through scales and arpeggios (or unaccompanied traditional song for singers);

- notation skills through a sight-reading test;
- listening skills and musical perception through aural tests.

How music works

We also encourage students to learn about the way music works. They can explore musical knowledge and understanding as well as creative skills through our Music Theory, Practical Musicianship and Jazz exams.

Understanding how music works helps students to make music with greater awareness, confidence and sensitivity. This becomes increasingly important as they progress with their learning. So candidates who want to take an instrumental or Singing exam at Grade 6 or above must first pass Grade 5 (or above) in Music Theory, Practical Musicianship or a solo Jazz instrument. This ensures they have the knowledge and understanding they need to successfully interpret and perform the music set on our higher grade syllabuses.

A holistic approach

This holistic approach helps students to understand, perform and enjoy music. It provides strong foundations for musical growth and a set of skills which students can use for the rest of their lives.

The exam elements

You can find detailed information about exam requirements in our syllabuses, available at www.abrsm.org/exams and in a range of printed booklets. Our graded music exams for instrumentalists and singers include the following elements.

Pieces or songs

For this section of the exam, candidates prepare and present a selection of pieces or songs chosen from the relevant syllabus.

- Instrumentalists play three set pieces.
- Singers perform three set songs at Grades 1 to 5 and four set songs at Grades 6 to 8.

It's important for students to experience different styles of music, so our syllabuses include a wide range of repertoire for them to choose from. We want candidates to find music that inspires them and that they enjoy learning and performing.

How do we choose the pieces and songs?

We have a panel of expert consultants – examiners, teachers and performers – who help us to refresh and renew our syllabuses. Using guidelines for each subject and grade, they put together an initial list of pieces or songs. They also refer to suggestions and feedback from teachers and candidates, and look at statistics showing the popularity of recently set pieces. This means that the lists include music that we are sure candidates will enjoy playing and that suits a range of tastes and approaches. After final checks on levels of difficulty and availability of the music, we approve the final lists which appear on our syllabuses.



Scales and arpeggios

Instrumentalists prepare and play scales and arpeggios (and other exercises) in a selection of keys, as listed in the syllabus.

Scales and arpeggios are important for building strong technical skills and musical understanding. By practising them students become familiar with their instrument and develop many aspects of technique, including articulation, tone and intonation.

Playing scales and arpeggios also helps students to understand keys. This gives them confidence and security when sight-reading, learning new pieces and performing – from a score or from memory, as a solo musician or with others.

Unaccompanied traditional song

In Singing exams candidates perform an unaccompanied traditional (folk) song of their choice from memory. This is instead of scales and arpeggios.

Learning to sing unaccompanied helps students to develop their sense of key and pulse without reference to an accompanying instrument. It also encourages control of tonality and pitch, sense of rhythm, use of tonal colour, musical communication and memory skills.

Sight-reading/sight-singing

All candidates have to play or sing a short piece which they have not seen before. In Singing exams this is accompanied by the examiner.

Sight-reading is a valuable skill with many benefits. It helps students to perform new music with confidence and learn pieces or songs more quickly. Good sight-reading skills also help when making music with others, so singing in a choir or playing in an ensemble becomes more rewarding and enjoyable.

Horn, Trumpet and Organ candidates at Grades 6 to 8 also take a transposition test, and Harpsichord candidates take a figured bass realisation test.

Aural tests

In the aural tests examiners are assessing a candidate's listening skills and musical perception. The tests cover awareness of pitch, pulse, rhythm, melody, harmony and other musical features.

Developing good aural skills is an important part of any music education and the ability to hear how music works helps students with all aspects of their music making and learning.

How we mark exams

Assessment in our graded instrumental and singing exams is based on our marking criteria, which you can find in full on pages 10 to 13.

The marking criteria show what we expect for the three levels of pass – Pass, Merit and Distinction – in each element of the exam. They are designed to maximise consistency in our marking and to make our approach to assessment clear for everyone.

Understanding how our examiners award marks is not only helpful for exam preparation but also for learning and progression generally. If you know what the ingredients of a good performance are then you also know what to work on to reach this goal.



Pieces and songs

The marking criteria cover the different aspects of playing or singing within five areas: pitch; time; tone; shape and performance. These can be applied to all instruments, including voice, and to all types of piece or song.

The marking criteria show what our examiners listen for under each of these headings:

Pitch – accuracy, clarity, reliability of notes and/or intonation.

Time – suitability of tempo, stability of pulse, sense of rhythm.

Tone – control and projection of sound, sensitivity and awareness in use of tonal qualities.

Shape – effectiveness and clarity of musical shaping and detailing.

Performance – overall command of the instrument or voice, involvement with the music, musical communication.

The marking criteria also show what examiners listen for in the other elements of our exams.

Scales and arpeggios (instrumentalists)

– accuracy of notes/pitch, rhythmic continuity and fluency, tone and shaping, security and confidence of the response.

Unaccompanied traditional song (singers)

– control of pitch and intonation, sense of rhythmic character, use of vocal qualities, effectiveness of musical shaping, quality of musical involvement, communication and storytelling.

Sight-reading/sight-singing

– rhythmic accuracy, continuity, accuracy of notes, pitch and key, realisation of musical detail, level of confidence in presentation.

Aural tests

– accuracy, musical perception and awareness, security of responses.

Awarding marks

Examiners mark each candidate based on what they hear in the exam room. We do not have quotas, so our examiners do not pass or fail a certain percentage of candidates.

When awarding marks examiners assess the candidate's control of the qualities and skills listed in the marking criteria. Candidates do not need to meet all the criteria to pass their exam as weakness in some areas is often balanced by stronger achievement in others.

Examiners mark up or down from the pass mark in every section, rather than taking marks away from the maximum or adding them from zero. For each element of the exam, candidates need to achieve two-thirds of the total possible marks to pass, but they don't need to pass all elements to achieve an overall pass in the exam.

The total number of marks available in an exam is 150. Candidates need:

- 100 marks to Pass;
- 120 marks to pass with Merit;
- 130 marks to pass with Distinction.

The total number of marks available for each exam element is listed here:

Instrumental exams		Singing exams		
	Grades 1 to 8		Grades 1 to 5	Grades 6 to 8
Piece 1	30	Song 1	30	24
Piece 2	30	Song 2	30	24
Piece 3	30	Song 3	30	21
—	—	Song 4	—	21
Scales and arpeggios	21	Unaccompanied traditional song	21	21
Sight-reading*	21	Sight-singing	21	21
Aural tests	18	Aural tests	18	18

* Includes a transposition test for Horn, Trumpet and Organ at Grades 6 to 8 and a figured bass realisation test for Harpsichord.

Marking criteria - instruments

Grades 1–8	Pieces <i>Pitch</i>	Time	Tone	Shape	Performance
Distinction 27–30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly accurate notes and intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fluent, with flexibility where appropriate Rhythmic character well conveyed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well projected Sensitive use of tonal qualities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressive, idiomatic musical shaping and detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assured Fully committed Vivid communication of character and style
Merit 24–26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Largely accurate notes and intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustained, effective tempo Good sense of rhythm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainly controlled and consistent Good tonal awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear musical shaping, well-realised detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive Carrying musical conviction Character and style communicated
Pass 20–23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally correct notes Sufficiently reliable intonation to maintain tonality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suitable tempo Generally stable pulse Overall rhythmic accuracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally reliable Adequate tonal awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some realisation of musical shape and/or detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally secure, prompt recovery from slips Some musical involvement
Below Pass 17–19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequent note errors Insufficiently reliable intonation to maintain tonality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unsuitable and/or uncontrolled tempo Irregular pulse Inaccurate rhythm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uneven and/or unreliable Inadequate tonal awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical shape and detail insufficiently conveyed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insecure, inadequate recovery from slips Insufficient musical involvement
13–16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Largely inaccurate notes and/or intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Erratic tempo and/or pulse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serious lack of tonal control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Musical shape and detail largely unrealised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacking continuity No musical involvement
10–12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly inaccurate notes and/or intonation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incoherent tempo and/or pulse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No tonal control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No shape or detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unable to continue for more than a short section
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No work offered

Grades 1–8		Grades 1–8	
Scales and arpeggios		Aural tests	
Sight-reading			
Distinction 19–21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Highly accurate notes/pitch ● Fluent and rhythmic ● Musically shaped ● Confident response 	Distinction 17–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accurate throughout ● Musically perceptive ● Confident response
Merit 17–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Largely accurate notes/pitch ● Mostly regular flow ● Mainly even tone ● Secure response 	Merit 15–16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses ● Musically aware ● Secure response
Pass 14–16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Generally correct notes/pitch, despite errors ● Continuity generally maintained ● Generally reliable tone ● Cautious response 	Pass 12–14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengths just outweigh weaknesses ● Cautious response
Below Pass 11–13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Frequent errors in notes and/or pitch ● Lacking continuity and/or some items incomplete ● Unreliable tone ● Uncertain response and/or some items not attempted 	Below Pass 9–11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Weaknesses outweigh strengths ● Uncertain response
7–10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Very approximate notes and/or pitch ● Sporadic and/or frequently incomplete ● Serious lack of tonal control ● Very uncertain response and/or several items not attempted 	6–8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inaccuracy throughout ● Vague response
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No work offered 	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No work offered

Sight-reading also includes transposition for Horn, Trumpet and Organ (Grades 6–8) and figured bass realisation for Harpsichord (Grades 4–8). In these cases, of the total 21 marks, 12 are allocated to sight-reading and 9 to transposition (or figured bass realisation), and one combined mark is recorded.

Marking criteria - Singing

Grades 1–5		Songs		Grades 6–8	
	Pitch	Time	Tone	Shape	Performance
Distinction 27–30	● Highly accurate notes and intonation	● Fluent, with flexibility where appropriate	● Well projected	● Expressive, idiomatic musical shaping and detail	● Assured
		● Rhythmic character well conveyed	● Sensitive use of tonal qualities		
Merit 24–26	● Largely accurate notes and intonation	● Sustained, effective tempo	● Mainly controlled and consistent	● Clear musical shaping, well-realised detail	● Positive
		● Good sense of rhythm	● Good tonal awareness		
Pass 20–23	● Generally correct notes	● Suitable tempo	● Generally reliable	● Some realisation of musical shape and/or detail	● Generally secure, prompt recovery from slips
		● Sufficiently reliable intonation to maintain tonality	● Adequate tonal awareness		
Below Pass 17–19	● Frequent note errors	● Unsuitable and/or uncontrolled tempo	● Uneven and/or unreliable	● Musical shape and detail insufficiently conveyed	● Insecure, inadequate recovery from slips
		● Inadequate intonation to maintain tonality	● Irregular pulse		
13–16	● Largely inaccurate notes and/or intonation	● Erratic tempo and/or pulse	● Serious lack of tonal control	● Musical shape and detail largely unrealised	● Lacking continuity
10–12	● Highly inaccurate notes and/or intonation	● Incoherent tempo and/or pulse	● No tonal control	● No shape or detail	● No musical involvement
8–9					
7–8					
0	● No work offered	● No work offered	● No work offered	● No work offered	● No work offered

Grades 1–8		Unaccompanied traditional song		Sight-singing		Grades 1–8		Aural tests	
Distinction 19–21	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Excellent control of pitch and intonation● Rhythmic character well conveyed● Sensitive use of vocal qualities● Expressive, idiomatic musical shaping● Fully committed communication, vivid story-telling			<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Fluent, rhythmically accurate● Accurate notes/pitch/key● Musical detail realised● Confident presentation			Distinction 17–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Accurate throughout● Musically perceptive● Confident response	
	Merit 17–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Good control of pitch and intonation● Rhythmic character conveyed● Good use of vocal qualities● Clear musical shaping● Good musical involvement and story-telling			<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Adequate tempo, usually steady pulse● Mainly correct rhythm● Largely correct notes/pitch/key● Largely secure presentation			Merit 15–16	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses● Musically aware● Secure response
Pass 14–16		<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Generally reliable control of pitch and intonation● Adequate sense of rhythmic character● Sufficient use of vocal qualities● Some musical shaping● Some musical involvement and story-telling			<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Continuity generally maintained● Note values mostly realised● Pitch outlines in place, despite errors● Cautious presentation				Pass 12–14
	Below Pass 11–13	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Unreliable control of pitch and/or intonation● Inadequate sense of rhythmic character● Insufficient use of vocal qualities● Lack of musical shaping● Insufficient musical involvement and/or story-telling			<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Lacking overall continuity● Incorrect note values● Very approximate notes/pitch/key● Insecure presentation			Below Pass 9–11	
7–10		<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Very unreliable control of pitch and/or intonation● Lacking rhythmic character● No use of vocal qualities● No musical shaping● Lacking musical involvement and/or story-telling			<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No continuity or incomplete● Note values unrealised● Pitch outlines absent● Very uncertain presentation				6–8
	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No work offered			<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No work offered			0	

What to expect

An ABRSM exam is an exciting challenge for candidates and we do everything we can to make the experience positive and rewarding. Our examiners aim to put every candidate at ease and to create an atmosphere in which they can give their best performance.

Before the exam

At the exam venue

Our exams take place at a variety of different venues. We run many of these as ABRSM centres.

Some candidates take their exams at venues organised by their school or teacher. We call this a 'visit'. The school or teacher arranges this with us and is then responsible for providing everything for the exams on the day.

At ABRSM centres there will be signs showing candidates where to go and a steward to welcome them. The steward makes a note that candidates have arrived, shows them to the waiting area, and warm-up room if available, then into the exam room at the right time.

Our stewards and examiners work together throughout the day to make sure everything runs smoothly for candidates. Just like examiners, our stewards are there to help candidates to do their best.

In the waiting area

We usually ask candidates to arrive at least ten minutes before their exam. This can be more in some international centres.

Candidates can use this time to get their music ready, assemble their instrument, warm up or make a list of their pieces or songs to give to the examiner.

We train our examiners to keep to the timetable and the exams usually run on time. If they do run late, the steward will tell everyone in the waiting room about any revised timings.





Warming up

Most exam preparation, practice and rehearsing takes place well before the exam day, but it is also important for candidates to have time to prepare and settle at the exam venue before their exam begins. This might include thinking about the music they are going to perform or warming up ready to play or sing.

A number of ABRSM centres have a separate warm-up room, sometimes with a piano. If candidates want to use the warm-up room for a few minutes before their exam then the steward will organise this.

If there is no warm-up room, candidates can warm up for a short time in the waiting area. However, if the exam room is very close to the waiting area it won't be possible to warm up aloud. In this situation, teachers and candidates need to think about ways to warm up instruments, fingers or embouchures silently.

Once in the exam room, all candidates are welcome to play or sing a few notes to warm up, and our examiners encourage them to do this. This can be particularly helpful for pianists, who will want to try out the piano.

It's natural to feel nervous

Some candidates will feel nervous before or during their exam. This is natural and is something that our stewards and examiners understand. With experience, many people learn how to deal with nerves and taking exams can actually help with this. Other ways to help include:

- accepting nerves as normal;
- performing regularly in front of others;
- taking mock exams;
- arriving in good time at the exam centre;
- taking a few calm breaths before the exam itself.

During the exam

How long does an exam take?

A Grade 1 exam lasts for around 12 minutes. As the grades get higher the exams gradually become longer, with Grade 8 taking around 30 minutes. Timings vary slightly depending on the instrument and grade, and any arrangements we have made for candidates with access needs or who need an interpreter.

You can find timings for all our exams at www.abrsm.org.

In the exam room

When candidates go into the exam room the examiner welcomes them and confirms their name. Candidates will see everything for their exam in place – a piano, a chair for performers who sit while playing and a desk where the examiner sits to listen and write the mark form.

Sometimes there are two examiners in the room. One is there to run and mark the exam and the other is there as an observer. This is an essential part of our training and quality assurance processes. If there are two examiners present, this will not affect the marking or results and the steward on the day will explain this to candidates before they go into the room.

During the exam there may be short pauses between pieces or songs and sections. This is nothing to worry about – the examiner will just be writing comments on the mark form.

About the piano

The piano at the exam venue might be an upright or a grand. All pianos at ABRSM exam centres are of consistently good quality and are tuned and checked before any exams take place. Examiners also try out the piano at the start of the day and then play it during the aural tests in every exam. This means they know what it feels like to play a particular piano and what candidates will be experiencing in their exams.

Setting up

In the exam room candidates can spend a short time getting comfortable and settled before the exam begins. This might include adjusting the piano stool or putting the music stand in the best place – something to think through before the day. The examiner will help with adjusting or moving things if necessary and will also give candidates the opportunity to warm up by playing or singing a few notes.



Tuning

For many instrumentalists, learning how to tune their instrument is an important part of learning to play. Tuning is also an important part of setting up before the exam.

Candidates can usually check their tuning before going into the exam room, so they only need to do final tuning to the piano at the start of the exam. For some instruments and grades the teacher or accompanist is allowed to help with this (see the syllabus for details).

Examiners cannot help with tuning or adjusting instruments. However, if a candidate needs help, and it is not available, examiners will do what they can. They might offer to change the order of the exam – doing the aural tests first, for example – to give time for help to arrive. Or, if possible, they might change the timetable so the candidate can take the exam later in the day, once help has been found.

Accompaniment

Singers and instrumentalists playing accompanied pieces must bring an accompanist with them. Examiners cannot accompany a candidate, as this would affect their ability to mark the exam, and we do not allow recorded accompaniments (except in Jazz exams).

However, if an accompanist is unavailable or late, examiners will do what they can to help by changing the order of the exam or, if possible, the timetable to give time for an accompanist to arrive.

The order of the exam

Candidates can do the elements of the exam in any order. This is something that candidate and teacher can decide together before the exam.

Candidates with an accompanist usually begin with their pieces or songs. The accompanist goes into the exam room with them and leaves after the pieces or songs. If candidates decide to begin with a different section of the exam, they should tell the steward who can then call the accompanist at the right time.

Candidates playing the guitar, harp, percussion or keyboard instruments often prefer to begin with scales and arpeggios, as this provides an opportunity to warm up and, for pianists, try the instrument.





Pieces and songs

In the exam, candidates perform pieces or songs chosen from the repertoire lists in the syllabus. The syllabus also includes additional information about many aspects of this exam element, such as exam music and editions, interpreting the score (fingerings, bowing, metronome marks and realising ornaments), repeats and page turns.

Before the exam begins, examiners need to know which pieces or songs a candidate is going to perform, so they can be checked against the syllabus and listed on the mark form. As the Singing repertoire lists are much longer than the lists for instrumental exams, we ask singers to have their songs written down on a piece of paper ready to give to the examiner. It helps if candidates include the name of each song, the composer and the number from the syllabus list, such as A2 or B1. We provide pre-printed slips for this at the back of syllabus booklets and on our website, or candidates can use a piece of paper.

Instrumental candidates are welcome to do the same for their pieces, or they can simply tell the examiner what they are going to play.

During longer pieces examiners may ask candidates to stop playing, once they have heard enough to make an assessment.

Scales and arpeggios (instrumentalists)

For this section, examiners ask candidates to play a selection of the requirements set for the grade. Examiners usually ask for at least one of each type of scale/arpeggio pattern listed in the syllabus.

We publish guideline speeds for scales and arpeggios on our website, in our syllabus booklets and in our books of scale requirements. However, speed is just one aspect of playing scales. Candidates need to achieve a balance between speed and the other qualities listed in the marking criteria, such as accuracy, evenness of tone and regularity of flow.



Unaccompanied traditional song (singers)

Instead of scales and arpeggios, singers perform an unaccompanied traditional (folk) song of their choice, from memory. Candidates can sing the song in any key. If they need to they can play the first note or key-chord on the piano before they perform the song.

Sight-reading/sight-singing

Candidates have half a minute to look at and try out the sight-reading before they begin the test. Examiners explain this when they hand over the music. Nothing is assessed during this preparation time and candidates can play or sing any part of the test out loud. The important thing is that they feel comfortable using the time in a way that suits them. This is something that teachers and candidates can plan before the exam.

Aural tests

For this element of the exam, examiners go to the piano to play the tests and ask the candidate some questions. The aural tests only take a few minutes but tell examiners much about candidates' listening skills and musical awareness.

During this section, examiners assess a candidate's overall response rather than awarding separate marks for individual tests.

Where tests involve a sung response, examiners listen for the pitch, not the quality of the singing, and candidates can hum or whistle if they prefer.

After the aural tests, examiners return to the desk to write their comments on the mark form.

What about mistakes?

Examiners understand that candidates can make mistakes in an exam which they might not have made in lessons or practice. Examiners also recognise when candidates recover well from a mistake and they take this into account in their marking.

In most cases, exam results match teachers' expectations but sometimes teachers might be surprised by a candidate's result. This might be because they are comparing it with the singing or playing that happens in lessons, whereas examiners can only mark what they hear on the day.

At the heart of a graded music exam is a live performance to an examiner and being able to perform in this situation is an important part of taking an exam.

After the exam

Mark forms and certificates

In the UK and Ireland, we issue candidates' results within two to three weeks of the exam. In other countries this may vary.

All candidates receive a mark form which provides a clear, helpful record of what happened during the exam. It shows the marks awarded for each exam element and an overall total mark. The comments on the mark form give an indication of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses in relation to our marking criteria.

Successful candidates also receive a certificate. The certificate celebrates their achievement and provides a record that they have met the standards set in their exam. All certificates incorporate security features to ensure that each one is unique and cannot be reproduced.

Checking and quality assurance

Before we issue results, all mark forms go through a checking process. We also record marks and read a selection of mark forms as part of our quality assurance procedures. This helps us to maintain our consistency and high standards.

Thinking about results

Most candidates pass their exams. This can give a great sense of personal achievement as well as motivation for future music making and learning.

When looking at candidates' results it helps to remember that success starts at the pass mark, and also that exams are just one part of their overall musical learning and progression.

There are various reasons why candidates might not do so well as expected. Perhaps they were not quite ready for the exam or were overcome by the performance situation on the day. While it is naturally disappointing if a result does not reach the pass mark, it is important to keep this in proportion. The value of the exam is just as much in the progress made, as a result of having a target to aim for, as in the assessment itself.

Next steps

By reading the examiner's comments on the mark form, alongside the marking criteria, teachers and candidates can see why a particular mark was awarded. Whatever the result, the mark form can help them to decide what to focus on in the future. There is no need to go straight on to the next grade. Ideally there will be plenty of time between exams for a wide range of different music making, learning and listening activities.

These are all things for the teacher and candidate to think about together after an exam and when planning their next steps.



About our examiners

ABRSM examiners are all highly qualified, experienced musicians. They might be teachers, performers or conductors. As examiners they combine their own skills, abilities, knowledge and understanding with those developed through our comprehensive and rigorous examiner training.

A generalist approach

Our exams are *music* exams first, rather than instrumental or singing exams, and because of this we believe in the importance of having generalist music examiners.

ABRSM examiners assess all instruments and singing. Using our marking criteria they assess the quality of the music making as generalist musicians, rather than as instrumental or vocal specialists. Our examiners mark the musical outcome, not the technical means used to achieve it. This allows consistent marking across all instruments.

However, we do use specialists to choose the pieces and songs for our syllabuses, to create our sight-reading and sight-singing tests, and to make decisions about technical requirements.

Selection and training

Our recruitment and training programme for examiners includes an initial interview and practical tests, followed by group and one-to-one training. We then closely monitor and support all new examiners to make sure they are working to our high standards.

Our training is based on three fundamental aspects of examining: manner, method and marking. We know that an examiner's manner has a big impact on the way candidates feel about their exam, so this influences all aspects of our examiner training. We train our examiners to:

- provide a warm welcome;
- create a positive atmosphere;
- put candidates at ease;
- be calm and encouraging;
- show empathy and understanding;
- treat all candidates kindly, fairly and with respect.

Training also focuses on the method of examining. This covers the practicalities of the exam and making sure everything runs smoothly for candidates.

Finally, we train our examiners to use the ABRSM marking criteria. Examiners make all their marking decisions and write up the mark forms during the exams. Our training gives them the skills to make reliable and consistent assessments and to write helpful, sympathetic comments.

Maintaining standards

We expect all our examiners to work to consistently high standards, and we have thorough quality assurance processes in place to ensure this happens.

Moderation – a team of highly experienced examiners act as moderators. They sit in with examiners as they work to check they are examining to the required standards. This happens for all examiners at least every two to three years.

Mark form reviews – we review each examiner's mark forms every two to three years.

Statistical reviews – we regularly record, monitor and review the marks awarded by all examiners.

We also provide continuing professional development for our examiners through annual conferences, regular seminars, observation and mentoring.

Other assessments

In addition to our graded exams for instrumentalists and singers, we offer a range of other assessments. You can find detailed information about these at www.abrsm.org/exams.

Music Medals

- Five levels: Copper, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum.
- For pupils at the early stages of learning an instrument.
- Ideal for pupils learning in groups.
- Assessed by the teacher and moderated by ABRSM.
- All candidates receive a certificate which includes a commentary.
- Successful candidates receive a Music Medals badge.

Available in the UK only.

Prep Test

- For young learners who have been playing or singing for about six to nine months.
- Encourages the development of technique and musicianship.
- A relaxed introduction to the exam experience.
- No marks are awarded and there is no pass or fail.
- On the day, all candidates receive a certificate from the examiner which includes positive and helpful comments.

Music Theory

- Grades 1 to 8
- Assessed through written exams.
- Covers notation in Western music, intervals, keys, scales and chords, rhythm, melody and harmony, and analysis of written music including knowledge of instruments, styles and periods.

Practical Musicianship

- Grades 1 to 8
- A practical assessment where candidates sing or play their responses to various tests.
- Encourages students to develop the ability to 'think in sound' and perform spontaneously.
- Focuses on skills that give candidates an understanding of musical language and insights into how music works.
- The examiner awards an overall grading rather than a mark.

Jazz

- Grades 1 to 5
- For Piano, Flute, Clarinet, Saxophones, Trumpet, Cornet, Flugelhorn and Trombone.
- Encourages imagination, creativity and spontaneity.
- Covers learning by ear and from notation, improvisation and all-round musicianship.
- Jazz Ensemble exams are also available, at three levels: Initial, Intermediate, Advanced.

Available in selected centres.

Performance Assessment

- Open to singers and instrumentalists at any level.
- Particularly suitable for adults and for students with special needs who may not be able to access graded music exams.
- Good preparation for an audition, performance or diploma exam.
- Candidates perform their own choice of music and there are no scales, sight-reading or aural tests.
- No marks are awarded and there is no pass or fail.
- On the day, all candidates receive a certificate from the examiner which includes positive and helpful comments.

Ensembles

- Three levels: Primary, Intermediate, Advanced.
- For a range of ensembles from two to ten performers.
- The examiner awards an overall grading rather than a mark.
- Each member of the successful ensemble receives a certificate.

Choral Singing

- Three levels: Initial, Intermediate, Advanced.
- The examiner awards an overall grading rather than a mark.
- Each member of the successful choir receives a certificate.

Available in selected centres.

Diplomas

- For musicians looking for new goals and additional qualifications or planning a career in music.
- ARSM: a performance-only diploma for anyone who has passed Grade 8.
- DipABRSM, LRSM and FRSM diplomas available in three subjects: Music Performance, Instrumental/Vocal Teaching and Music Direction.

Information and resources

ABRSM online

Visit www.abrsm.org for information about all aspects of our exams, including syllabuses, how to book, information and guidance, and films and digital resources.

Books, recordings and resources

We produce a wide range of resources to support teachers and students as they prepare for all elements of our exams. You can buy these through our website. Books and CDs are also available from music shops worldwide.

www.abrsm.org/shop

Feedback and concerns

We take the quality and consistency of our exams very seriously and we welcome feedback about the venue, the exam or results.

www.abrsm.org/examconcerns

Accreditation

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland our Music Medals, graded exams (for instruments, Singing, Jazz and Music Theory) and diplomas are regulated and fit within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). Many of our exams are also formally recognised by institutions in a number of other countries.

www.abrsm.org/accreditation

Access for candidates with specific needs

We aim to make our exams as accessible as possible to all candidates, regardless of sensory impairments, learning difficulties or particular physical needs.

www.abrsm.org/specificneeds

Safeguarding children

We have a Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy. This includes a Code of Practice for everyone who works on our behalf.

www.abrsm.org/safeguarding



ABRSM is a charity registered in England and Wales (292182) and Scotland (SC043343).



Supporting the teaching and
learning of music in partnership
with the Royal Schools of Music

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