



MUSIC FOUNDATION

## Exams – how do we measure musical ability?

Papers from a series of seminars given by Jane Cutler

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## **Exams – how do we measure musical ability?**

### **Introduction**

In covering the subject of graded music exams, I hope to start you thinking about what we are offering children as we start them on their musical journey. Primarily we want them to enjoy their musical experiences; however we also have the desire to know that they will progress with their skills and become independent learners, able to participate in music making of (eventually) their choice. In the previous paper about 'Practice' I wrote about keeping instrumental playing as pressure free as possible and looking at exams as an option along the way. It is within that context that I pick up here.

### **My experience**

Throughout my musical upbringing exams were there as a backdrop to the world of music. This did not come from home - my parents were very liberal and supportive and I managed to have a healthy disregard for exams, but this ran in parallel to my experience of the music world; I was very aware of the obsession of "what grade are you?" The more involved I became in music and the more groups I joined, the more it became the dominating force.

My first experience of exams was Grade 2 'cello. I had two friends who played the cello too and when they failed this exam, they promptly gave up.

My youth orchestra was dominated by the exams question and the seating within the orchestra was decided by what grade you were; friendships were almost defined by your grade - everyone knew your level (at least that's how it felt). Your personal worth was defined by where you sat in the orchestra - the front desks being the good, smart and usually the better off!

Is orchestral music only for children who play well - or should we be taking the example of the Venezuelan 'El Sistema' - where players join the orchestra on day one of learning? A great story from Venezuela was the first music making event for a new bassoonist - he was taught one note and then nudged by a fellow musician when that note was to be played - I can imagine that it sounded rather curious but I also think he would have been having such a great time 'playing' Beethoven V and learning from the experience.

For a long time I just had an uncomfortable feeling about exams and their benefits; it took many years of teaching before I was able to articulate exactly why exams are to be treated with caution.

Although I disagree with our graded system, I have always had a strange kind of 'respect' for exams. I had been conditioned into accepting that there were good and reliable. When I came to look at exactly what exams offered as a structure or assessment process I realised that my regard was based on presumptions.

Having sorted out why I had a problem with the grades, I was then able to enter children for exams with a better understanding of what I was trying to achieve with

them. I was able to help my pupils to do well and possibly benefit from the experience, even if it was not particularly joyous.

### **Exams – treat with caution**

Having been conditioned to think that graded exams had the ultimate value and provided the means to judge good musicians, I had a very low regard for myself as a musician and a warped view of other's ability.

Passing an exam is clearly not the same as being a good musician – it involves being able to learn three pieces and perform them to an examiner and then, in most cases, to 'get through' the scales, arpeggios, sight reading and aural without too many disasters. This is a very unnatural situation – as a performer you usually perform to an audience who are 'on your side' and want to hear you play well, not someone with a note pad giving you marks out of 22 for your playing. For those of you who have never put yourself in this position I can tell you that it is very scary. Or, in the words of a child who was asked after the exam "how was that?" she replied "horrid". She got 92%.

It wasn't until I began teaching that I felt my strengths and weaknesses as a musician. When I came into contact with the Kodaly method, I realised that I was a good musician, I just hadn't been given the right tools to do the job. Through this method I was suddenly able to 'hear', read and be discerning. My playing improved and I became articulate about all areas of music, many of which had, up to this point, existed as a theoretical world (structure, tonality, even intonation) and I was able to give reasons for my opinions.

Working with the Kodaly method, we are able to give children the ability to participate and understand music in a way that is very sophisticated but because it is effortless it often seems unimpressive to those who are witnessing the learning or do not know what to look for/at. I have often come across classically trained musicians who can't clap one of DaCapo's syncopated rhythm cards and I had to do a double take knowing that our 3 yellow group (8/9 year olds) could do this easily. Our composer in residence, John Ashton Thomas, commented that the children who participate in the DaCapo 'In Schools' projects have developed very tangible skills and he picked out the impressive nature of their rhythm reading and understanding, especially the syncopations which, in his experience, can challenge students at music college. My son, an eighteen year-old music student, has commented that the children in Red Singing Circle (our 5-7 year olds) are able to read rhythms that his college peers can't read or execute. None of the skills described above are tested in grade exams!

### **Exams – not a structure for learning**

The exams syllabus is a series of tests. It should not be mistaken for a structure for learning. However, many music teachers use it as such. This is a reasonable presumption as they are graded 1-8 and therefore progressively difficult. What are not questioned or looked at are the elements being examined. The syllabus looks like a pathway of learning. However it is guided by the constraints of the instrument and is not primarily musically structured. The other consideration for the grades is the reading – nothing is required of a pupil that is not logical to read. For example the cello syllabus takes the easiest thing to play on the cello and then chooses a selection of pieces that can be

played at that level of physical difficulty. All other musical learning is a consequence of this repertoire – it is not carefully planned progression. You may find ‘complex’ rhythms in an ‘easy’ piece. You find a huge variety of tonalities in this music and the intervals used are often very hard to pitch and sing (easy to play but difficult to hear and therefore usually a little out of tune!). This process is not just unrewarding to learn but also, because it is not singable material, we tend to shut down our ears. Children don’t listen to the sound that they make if they don’t know what sound they should be making.

In putting together a set of tests which appear to have a progression of difficulty we often see very poor teaching. Although we should not blame the exams syllabus for this (they do not call it a syllabus for learning), you can understand why teachers think that it exactly what it is! Another reason why teachers use the exam system as a structure for learning is that there is nothing else to replace it with. There are no music led syllabuses that treat all instruments in the same way- that is with graded repertoire following logical, progressive musical steps. DaCapo repertoire does this.

If we look at the musical content of the exams we can see that the elements of music (pitch, pulse, rhythm, expression, notation and improvisation and composition) do not have a progression within the exams and are introduced randomly. There is no equality across the instruments. Grade 1 Flute and Grade 1 Cello require very different areas of musical understanding.

### **Kodaly and the complete musician**

On the other hand, Kodaly provided us with a brilliantly clear progression through the musical elements: he was working with a dedicated team of educators who endeavoured to understand how children learn and how they need to take on the information; he then plotted the order to introduce all of the blocks for music making.

There are other educators – Dalcroze, Orff and Suzuki to name a few - who have developed systems with their own merits and good philosophies. None have taken the bare bones of music, deconstructed the elements of the art form and developed a pathway with such clear and simple strategies for teaching these elements so that all teachers can deliver them and every musician can benefit from the process in the way that Kodaly did.

DaCapo have taken Kodaly’s musical progression as a teaching tool and applied it to the learning of an instrument so that the technical skills are developed as a result of musical endeavour and not the other way round. In doing this we have found that our pupils explore the reaches of the instruments with more freedom and less fear. If you have a melody and can ‘inner hear’ it and expect to be able to play starting on different notes, then you explore that possibility. This then leads you into technical problems that you are able to overcome as you know what you are trying to achieve (the melody) and see the point of doing it. A cellist can learn to play in thumb position sooner than is recommended on the graded exams because it is just another place on the instrument. What makes this hard in the exams pathway is that the higher notes need a different clef, which make it more ‘difficult’. DaCapo’s pianists can play extremes on the piano from lesson one – graded exams for piano seem to start in the middle of the piano (with middle C) and then move outwards gradually until by grade 8 we have

finally reached the outer ends of the keyboards. The notes that are 'far away' are not really more difficult – just more difficult to read.

If you rely solely on conventional notation, five lines and naming the notes with letter names, you do not necessarily build an ear and eye, which can read and hear the music inside the head. With the Kodaly method we adapt different forms of notation, enabling our pupils to read and hear intervals and equip them to play that melody anywhere on an instrument. It is a slow but very secure process. My paper on the DaCapo curriculum deals with this process in more detail.

The DaCapo way of musical problem-solving is to hear it, sing it, break it down, clap it and then play it - the more traditional way of learning takes a series of physical problems and puts them together and finally they make a tune. Recently (over the last 15 years) more music for beginners has been written with this process in mind and as a teacher I find the quality of the music/content very poor. This music is not of good enough quality to give to children, it will not teach them about music and worse still it is being used for exams, which means that children will be spending a lot of time playing the pieces to 'perfect' them, when they could be playing something much more interesting and musical.

The discrepancy between musical content, music as an expression and the technical problems of playing any particular instrument are most acute in the early stages. We find that by Grade 3 the DaCapo approach and the traditional world come together a little more. However the presumption that exams are necessary still needs to be challenged.

What do other countries have? Germany has more professional and paid orchestras per capita than the UK; many children learn music but they do not have a graded exams system. In America, instruments are often taught in whole classes and students learn their instruments by participating in music making – the bands!

Perhaps there are other ways to measure success? In order to know what we want to test we need to ask a few questions? What do we really want to know about what our children are gaining from their instrumental tuition?

**For me this list reads:**

- can they hear the music in their heads?
- have they developed strategies that will help them become independent learners?
- do they understand what they are doing?
- can they apply the knowledge in different contexts?
- can they work/ play with other musicians?
- are they flexible- can they do all of the things that they do at different speeds, in different keys, adapt to different styles?
- do they understand what they are doing?
- have they been equipped with information to share what they are doing and do they have independent ideas?

## **How can we assess these things?**

- we can watch them in ensembles
- give them a variety of challenges in a lesson
- play duets
- get them to perform
- compose and improvise
- sing
- make music with them

The DaCapo approach means that children acquire these skills over time; we do not recommend testing them too soon or often. We can do informal assessments and report on where children are at any one time; however, in my experience children take time to absorb all of the skills needed and they progress at differing rates and so a snapshot of where they are at any time is only that. **Like a good wine, you never know how they are going to turn out exactly, but need to leave them to absorb and develop as necessary.**

## **The fall-out**

Many teachers have taught their instrument well and with good intentions and taken pupils through the system with great success and there are many musicians who have reached high levels of musical excellence having taken many exams – I guess most of them would attribute their success to much more than the exam that they took. However for all the successes there are many, many less favourable consequences for those who did not pursue music because of the exams or had such bad experiences that they are emotionally damaged by them.

To return to where I started - the two friends who gave up when they failed the grade 2 exam; or my children's friends, who, when they expressed the lack of desire to do graded exams, were told by their teacher that there was no point in playing an instrument if they didn't take the exams – so they gave up.

There seems to be a sense that if you do not progress in music then there is no point in playing and you should give up. We use exams to determine this and if that isn't off-putting enough, the whole learning experience becomes more about the exams or about how good you are and not about music and the pleasure that it can bring.

## **Measuring Success**

At DaCapo our successes range from transforming a child who struggles with participation and integrating in a group into a child who can integrate and participate with a high level of understanding, skill and enjoyment; to enabling children who want to take music very seriously to do just that without singling them out as 'special' or 'better' than other children. We aim to stretch them and help them to see both the potential and the possibilities in their pursuit.

We congratulate the children when there are exam successes as the whole process is quite a tricky one and they deserve recognition for surviving! Perhaps we should have annual certificates for those children who have excelled in other ways.

- Most improved
- Best composition
- Best performance
- Best team player in a session
- Most transposition achieved 7
- Sing and play

**So – why if we have so little respect for the exams, do we:  
a) use them? and b) have pupils who do well?**

We use exams because they are there and people ask for them. They provide motivation for some pupils and they offer parents reassurance that what we are doing is actually 'working'. As a teacher there is no other external verification of our work. You have to be very strong to resist.

The reason that our children do so well in exams is two-fold. Firstly, we understand that the exam does not provide a structure for own syllabus, ensuring musical learning and so we teach via our progression. Secondly, in entering pupils for exams we are relaxed and the pupils are relaxed about taking them – it is a musical experience for us (as much as it can be ) and the children focus on the music not the exam! And finally, we know that the experience is not the most fun and so we make sure that they are well prepared for all the tests equally and not only relying on the pieces being well known.



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### **Some results:**

Harvey 89% Initial  
 Toby 87% Initial  
 Ruby 85% Initial  
 Florrie 99% Grade 1  
 Bethan 95% Grade 1 (10/10 sight reading)  
 Joe 130/150 Grade 1  
 Natasha 132/150 Grade 2  
 Hannah 92% Grade 2 (20/20 for one piece)  
 Ellis 95% Grade 3  
 Dan 92% Grade 8  
 Rachel 94% Grade 8  
 Susie 96% Grade 8

### **What's the alternative?**

Whilst the graded exams system remains we will all want to know what grade our children are, but I'd like to get to the stage where parents and teachers are asking different questions. I would add this list to the earlier one:

- what are your favourite pieces,?
- do you compose?
- what do you like most about your instrument?

- who is your favourite performer?
- who is your favourite composer?
- which groups do you enjoy the most?
- and above all, do you enjoy your music making?

My answer to my own question “how do you measure success” is that we probably shouldn't. In testing children we are not only putting them under pressure to ‘succeed’ and conform but also making music about exams and being the best rather than ensuring that they are enjoying their music making and finding more challenges along the way.

It is the teachers who should be assessed, monitored and supported to ensure that they are not merely teaching instrumental ‘requirements’ but that they are ensuring musical progression, understanding and involvement with all their pupils. They should be seeing that their pupils’ needs are met – not that they meet the needs of the exams.

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