

Ready for a Music Examination? Practical, specific indicators

By Amy Boyes

A music examination is a third-party assessment of a student's progress. In the best-case scenario, the examination grade level is appropriate, the student is well-prepared, and the examination is an affirmation of the learning process. But this is only the best-case scenario, and several questions should be asked by teachers and parents when considering music examinations:

What is the motivation for taking the examination?

Is an examination acting as a "cover" for what a student hasn't learned?

When is a student ready to take a music examination?

Amy Boyes answers these questions with references to current research on teaching methods and performance anxiety, and observations from her own teaching studio. She provides specific readiness indicators for examinations and discusses the motivation, pitfalls, and rewards of preparing students for music examinations.

Amy Boyes is a private music teacher in Ottawa, Canada (soon to be Warman, SK). Her time is split between teaching, examining, adjudicating, writing and speaking. Her articles have been featured in the Globe and Mail, American Music Teacher Magazine, the Piano Magazine (Formerly Clavier Companion), the Canadian Music Teacher Magazine and Piano Professional. She has two published books – "Micro Miracle" (Signature Editions, 2019) and "Yes, Miss Thompson" (Now or Never Publishing, upcoming in 2023). Amy holds a B Mus from Brandon University, M Mus from the University of Alberta and diplomas in piano performance and teaching from the Royal Conservatory and Trinity College, London.

This session was first published as:

READY FOR A MUSIC EXAMINATION? European Piano Association (UK) Piano Professional Magazine, January 2021. epta-uk.org

Notes and References

History of Music Examinations in Canada:

musespeak.com/blog/2013/03/music-examination-systems-in-canada-2.html

What is the motivation for taking the examination?

Deadlines can be motivators (and the flipside can be also true).

science.org/content/article/no-pressure-nsf-test-finds-eliminating-deadlines-halves-number-grant-proposals

Achievement or Assessment?

- Richard Phelps, an advocate for standardized testing in American schools, identifies two potential pitfalls in "Teaching to the Test."¹

Is an examination acting as a "cover" for what a student hasn't learned?

What does not indicate readiness:

1. Length of time studying
2. Parental expectations
3. Passing of previous examination grade

The passing of an examination should not sanction unsatisfactory musical development..

When is a student ready to take a music examination?

1. **The student should be confident in many styles of repertoire.**
2. **The student should regularly perform, leading up to an examination.**

Anxiety in performance.²

Performance space familiarity.³

Performance on a variety of instruments

3. **Technical exercises and musicianship skills should be practiced regularly and mastered well-in-advance of an examination.**

¹ Phelps, R. (2011). Teach to the Test? *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), 35(4), 38-42.

² LeBlanc, A., Jin, Y., Obert, M., & Siivola, C. (1997). Effect of Audience on Music Performance Anxiety. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 45(3), 480-496.

³ Boucher, H., & Ryan, C. (2011). Performance Stress and the Very Young Musician. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 58(4), 329-345.

Two further indicators that more time is needed:

- 1. Repertoire selections do not yet flow.**
- 2. The notes are there, but nothing more.**

If a student is well-prepared, performs confidently and receives an encouraging critique, then an examination affirms that the learning process is going well, that the teacher is communicating expectations clearly, and the student is rising to challenges. The experience will be rewarding for everyone, but more than that, the student has become a better musician.