Fond memories and future directions

My history with the AMEB goes back to the 1970s when Miss Muriel Shepherd entered me for the AMEB Grade 3 piano examination in Melbourne. I still remember the examiner’s encouraging comments! I completed many more AMEB exams in NSW—in piano and musicianship, with Mrs Valda Lang, and in oboe under teachers at school and the Conservatorium. Later I entered my own oboe students in examinations. Now my 10-year-old son has completed AMEB examinations in piano and cello in NSW, and this year he will take them in South Australia.

That sense of tradition, shared experience, reliable standards and high quality are all important. But it is also important that the almost century-old AMEB adapts. Last year the AMEB entered an exciting partnership with the UK-based Rockschool which means that the AMEB now delivers Rockschool Australia examinations. In addition to new syllabus launches for piano, double bass and percussion, the AMEB also launched its brand new musical theatre syllabus.

For five years I have served the AMEB at state and federal levels. It is a privilege to be part of an organisation whose mission is to provide high quality music and speech resources and assessment training and opportunities across Australia. Many of our intrepid examiners have become annual fixtures in our regional cities. I am also mindful that the AMEB is only as good as its network of teachers, examiners, advisors, associations and schools. It is wonderful teachers such as Muriel and Valda, both loyal to the AMEB for decades, who passed that love of music and appreciation for AMEB repertoire, standards and challenges to their students.

Many thanks to our long-term AMEB supporters, and for those of you new to the AMEB, welcome!

Professor Jennie Shaw,
Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts,
University of Adelaide,
Deputy Chair AMEB Federal Board,
Chair AMEB Advisory Board (SA & NT)

AMEB subjects


Speech and Drama includes: Drama & Communication, Voice & Communication and Drama & Performance

Contemporary Popular Music includes: Keyboard, Guitar, Bass, Vocal, Drum kit

Theory includes: Music Craft, Theory & Musicianship, Speech & Performance

And now examining Rockschool!
The dictionary’s explanation of technique is “systematic procedure by which a complex task is accomplished...”

A plan of procedure is clearly needed and may be the first essential, but if we don’t have the tools, the best possible equipment, the process will be slow and uneven, producing more problems than solutions.

We’re often asked “Why do we need technical work? Why not just go straight to the much more enjoyable compositions left to us by great composers?”

Scales and arpeggios are not just a fitness regime for the fingers; they teach us practical fingering patterns, keys, a sense of harmonic colour – we must remember that technique is not only to do with manual dexterity; it involves listening and learning to judge tonal and speed gradation. Without these we can’t interpret or communicate ‘musical’ gestures.

Most piano tutor books show pictures of the ideal hand position and posture at the keyboard – the position acknowledged as the healthiest and most practical. Students who have naturally relaxed hands don’t need discussion about it, but if they have thumbs pointing away from the hand, or wrists held tightly too high or low, then certainly these are problems to be addressed. A smooth flow of finger movement in scales and arpeggios leads to ease of arm movement and eventual speed across the keyboard.

In the course of examining, I see many students struggle through technical work, often well under the stipulated minimum speeds, hampered by poor positioning which predictably results in uncontrolled tone and coordination. In the early grades there is hope that this will improve; in grades four and five such issues would warrant a comment from the examiner; by grade six an obvious lack of ‘easy evenness’ can become a serious handicap to musical presentation. Grade 8 presents the final challenge in the testing of technical development – scales in octaves, thirds and sixths, which demand well disciplined and responsive fingers.

In recent years, due to unfortunate time constraints, syllabus technique requirement has become smaller with only a sampling being heard in exams. Don’t be tricked into thinking that preparing only this minimum is enough – it should NOT preclude our teaching all keys and exercises as necessary!

Certificate and Diploma levels are examined as relatively mature performances. Technical facility/ability is expected as the result of years of the careful training which enables us to express musical ideals unhampered by technical weaknesses. The greatest performers have spent many hours developing their technical skills, before being able to fully ‘make music’!

Monika Laczofy, AMEB Federal Examiner and State Piano Examiner

Some years ago I had a very gifted piano student who progressed with ease to sixth grade.

She had a natural feeling for balance and played with feeling for direction and shape. She was technically advanced. But she had a mind of her own, and refused to take any interest in the study of theory, saying that our system of notation was archaic and unnecessarily unwieldy.

She enharmonically changed black note flats in her scores to sharps (what is the point of having two different names for the one note?), the B sharps to C (B sharp is a white note, and therefore a natural) and of course F double sharps to G, and so on.

She took no theory exams, and therefore could not receive full certificates. This did not concern her. But after receiving an Honours grading for her sixth grade exam she stopped learning because music “no longer made much sense to her”. With a thorough grounding in theory I have no doubt that she would have had the motivation to proceed to a much higher level.

The understanding of how music is designed deepens an awareness of composers’ intentions and enriches the student’s understanding and capacity to interpret. I have always believed that the written component of music should never be shelved when practical music is being studied, and I support the AMEB’s conviction that theory exams should be taken in conjunction with practical exams. The ability to read and write music fluently is as valuable for those who simply enjoy playing for leisure as it is for those who aspire to higher qualifications.

Ashleigh Tobin OAM, AMEB Theory Advisor and Piano Examiner

Sight reading

Candidates continue to struggle with sight reading, yet it is so important for their future enjoyment of making music.

It may help them to know that perfection in sight reading is a rarity and they shouldn’t be upset at not being able to “have another go” to get it right. What is important though, is that the continuous rhythmic flow and an even reading.

Rhythm is the most important part of sight reading. Candidates should aim to set up and maintain a stable pulse throughout and if they play a few incorrect notes on the way, this is much less an issue than a laboured and stagnant reading with correct notation.

In order to sight read with greater confidence, and hopefully enjoyment, they should be reading a short piece from sight as often as possible (a daily dose would be ideal!).

Time signatures and key signatures are an essential for successful sight reading and should be observed carefully. Before starting to play they will need to get a sense of the rhythm and sound the piece out in their head; try to relax and concentrate; keep their eyes on the page even if they make a mistake, so that they can read ahead. Candidates need to remember, not to stop and correct themselves, but just keep moving forward!

A final tip for the practice room: candidates should train and trust their fingers to find the notes, to play without looking at their hands. This ensures their focus is always on reading and interpreting the composer’s instructions!

Daniel Pereira, AMEB Piano Examiner
Five thoughts for enjoyable exams

I was one of many instrumental students who sat for an AMEB exam every year throughout most of my time at primary and secondary school, and I well remember the feelings of nervousness, stress and even straight-out cold fear in the days and hours before the exam.

Almost everybody experiences some degree of nervousness when put under pressure to perform at their best, but I think I would have enjoyed the process more if my teacher had told me the following five things:

“1. The exam is for you!”

An AMEB exam is a benchmark, a goal point and an opportunity for external feedback to help guide your progress, and all of these things are aimed at assisting YOU in YOUR musical pursuits. AMEB syllabuses are all designed to progressively equip you with the tools to engage in music making at the best level of your ability, and the exams are simply a way to consolidate and check your skills at each stage.

2. The examiners are on your side

As a young student going into a music examination, I imagined that the examiner was waiting to pounce on every error, every slip of intonation and every cracked note that came out of my instrument. In fact, it was exactly the opposite going on - the examiners were listening for my best musical attributes. Thinking of an exam as a chance to reveal your musical strengths rather than hide your weaknesses could be the first step towards a more enjoyable exam experience.

3. Fall in love with your repertoire

Practice time is an absolute joy when you have a genuine love for a piece, and this joy shines through in any performance. When choosing repertoire with or for a student, teachers have a number of things in mind – a particular piece may be perfect for strengthening an area of technique or exploring an aspect of a musical style. A student may connect with that piece immediately, but if not it’s worth spending a little bit of time getting to know it before dismissing it. Listening to recordings of great musicians playing your piece can be a great way to spark a love affair that lasts well beyond the examination date.

4. Get the full picture early

It seems obvious, but one thing that is guaranteed to cause extra stress is being unprepared for an aspect of the examination. So often, students focus on the repertoire component of the exam until the very last moment, and then try to cram their technical work, general knowledge and sight reading in the last few weeks. Getting a picture of the full exam requirements early on and chipping away week by week will help you gain more from all components of the exam and ensure that there is no last-minute panic.

5. Make practice a daily habit

It’s been said before, but the best way to make progress on your instrument is to spend time with it every day. Even if you REALLY don’t feel like practising, it’s easy to squeeze in 15 or 20 minutes. This is so much more enjoyable and productive than a panicked session spanning multiple hours the night before your lesson!”

If only I’d known then...

Steven Hodgson, Head of Publishing, AMEB Federal Office

Speech, Drama, Voice, Communication – The strength of the pack!

At a recent viewing of Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book, (Disney) the law of the jungle recited that ‘the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.’

Now while we are not wolves, it was evident at a recent Professional Development seminar of both Speech and Singing Teachers that we are indeed ‘the strength of the pack’. Bridging the gap and seeing similarities, strengths and exciting developments was the focus of the day, with both Singing and Speech teachers joining together to celebrate ‘the stage.’

Some new developments from the Federal Board about Diplomas on Demand, online examinations and Alternative Examinations were discussed as was a truly exciting collaboration that we now have with The Actor’s Centre here in Adelaide.

South Australia is a vibrant State, where our Artistic mastery is highlighted during ‘mad March’ with the Fringe and Adelaide Festivals and of course echoed throughout the year at various performances which celebrate the art of life – DRAMA!

The Actor’s Centre, Adelaide is a new and dynamic Drama Centre. Students can gain accreditation and mastery of their acting skills right here in S.A. What’s even more exciting is that the dynamic rigour which is part of the Actor’s Centre drama courses is echoed in our own AMEB Speech and Drama syllabuses. So much so, that we are able to unite with the Actor’s Centre to offer their students an opportunity to further their study with the AMEB, sitting both practical and theory examinations and eventually gaining their Associate in Drama and Performance (Performer’s) Diploma. These candidates will use the knowledge and skills gained with The Actor’s Centre along with the knowledge and skills gained through AMEB Speech and Drama, to strengthen their performance skills, ready to propel them toward the next step in their lives.

Speech and Drama has enjoyed a rich history with the AMEB. From its beginnings with Elocution to the move toward the understanding of the Voice (breathing, posture, vocal dynamics, the voice as an instrument, phonetics and physiology) and also of the richness of text in Drama (movement, staging, theatre history, performance – prose, verse, drama, non-fiction texts) found in its Speech and Drama syllabuses, it really is a comprehensive area of study which acknowledges the diversity of life and the multitude of talents in our students. Our syllabuses in Drama and Performance, Voice and Communication, Drama and Communication and Drama and Performance Theory hold something for absolutely everyone out there.

It is through the strength of the syllabus, the diversity of our community, the excitement of new adventures and new collaborations, that we are indeed ‘the strength of the pack’. When we share ideas with colleagues, not just in our own specialties but in building bridges across syllabuses and skills, then our collaboration can really be seen as a celebration of the art of life!

Louise Borgo, AMEB Speech and Drama Advisor and Examiner, Federal Theory Examiner
Congratulations to all performers for their very fine performances at the Awards Ceremony and Showcase in December 2015 some of whom are depicted below.

Adden Way Kin Chin
Grade 6 Piano
Teacher: Marianna Grynchuk

Nancy Zhang
Grade 6 Flute
Teacher: Alison Rosser

Alieysha Nicholls
Grade 6 Singing for Leisure
Teacher: Raelene Hardy

Nikki Bedworth
Grade 4 Classical Guitar
Teacher: Angus Christie

Charlotte-Jane Baker-Simpson
Grade 5 Violin
Teacher: Emily Dollman

Olivia McEvoy
Grade 6 Piano for Leisure
Teacher: Jodi Swiggs

Dylan Nguyen
AMusA Saxophone
Teacher: Beth Lyon

Scarlett Gallery
Certificate of Performance Violin
Teacher: Sharon Morley

Haneuelle Lovell
Grade 5 Violin
Teacher: Michael Milton

William Rompis
Grade 4 Piano
Teacher: Irina Reprintseva

Jasmine Milton
Grade 8 Violin
Teacher: Michael Milton

The double bass: by virtue of its size...

By virtue of its size, the double bass can be an awkward instrument to learn. It can take years to have everything working symbiotically.

In preparing for an exam, the candidate must ensure that he/she is technically secure in all areas. As an examiner though, one is also always listening for the “Holy Grail” of excellent tone production and beautiful sound quality. There are several factors which will help a student achieve these things.

Firstly, the size of the instrument can make a big difference to the sheer volume that can be produced. Naturally, a student has to be playing the correct instrument for their body size, but sometimes students stay on a smaller instrument long after they should have moved to a larger one. I would always encourage students to practise in front of a full-length mirror to monitor how their playing looks with regard to the following things:

**Bow angle**
The bow should always be perpendicular to the string being played. The most common problem is the tendency to have the tip of the bow pointing down towards the ground, when playing on the G string. The result is an airy sound which has no rich, full centre.

**Bow position**
Within any piece, scale or exercise, there will be the necessity to move your bow closer to the bridge. The higher the notes, the closer to the bridge you will need to be. The resulting sound will be clear and strong.

**Posture**
Excellent posture is another aspect which one should never overlook. With good posture, it is easy to tackle these issues, but if you slouch, the aforementioned issues can become almost impossible to fix.

Belinda Kendall-Smith,
AMEB Double Bass Examiner

www.ameb.adelaide.edu.au