Preparing for diplomas

For advanced students who have demonstrated a strong personal engagement with music, preparing for a diploma examination can be a rewarding and stimulating project. Compared with the level 2 examinations that precede them, the Associate and Licentiate diplomas have a format that is closer to a concert than to a conventional examination. There are two examiners and the repertoire consists mostly of standard concert works that require sustained confidence, maturity and concentration.

As teachers, we play a key role in assisting students to achieve their maximum potential at this level. Our first task is to help them select repertoire that is challenging yet achievable. It should allow them to demonstrate their strengths while also covering the required range of stylistic and technical elements. Rigorous early learning is critical. We all know what happens when houses are built on shoddy foundations. It is the same with music. Fingering and other technical tools, together with a “grammatical” understanding of the music, need to be set as priorities from the outset. As familiarity deepens, extra layers of engagement and sophistication are added. Finally, once all ingredients are in place, comes the “cooking” time – those final weeks when the emphasis changes from learning the notes to exploring and communicating the music.

This is the stage where trial performance opportunities can be extremely helpful. Strategies can include making audio or video recordings for evaluation and presenting home recitals for family and friends. Also worth considering is the opportunity the AMEB provides for performance evaluations. These enable the candidate to play an excerpt from their program to an experienced examiner, who provides feedback that can be used as a focus for continuing preparation.

While it is assumed that diploma candidates will be able to demonstrate a level of technical competence commensurate with the demands of the repertoire, equally important is the level of expressive ownership that is displayed. A mature focus upon the music itself, rather than merely the mechanics of playing it, will ensure the richest rewards. It is this that engages both the performer and the listener and represents what music is truly about.

Emeritus Professor David Lockett,
AMEB Examiner

P plate piano – A rewarding drive on the road to Preliminary

Like most teachers, I am continuously on a quest for fresh, inspiring teaching materials, so I attended the introductory session for AMEB P Plate Piano. Many unsuccessful purchases have made me skeptical about the claims of any new series, but listening to Elissa Milne play the pieces and talk about the teaching strategies, my interest was captured. I decided to try the books out on my fresh new group of primary school children aged 6 to 12 that had just finished the preparatory level, and I must say that I was astounded by the results. The kids loved everything about the books from the music to the illustrations and this happily lead to an increased enthusiasm for practice, and willingness to persist past difficulties. Parents often tell me that their children continue to practice the pieces long after we are finished with them in the lessons – such enthusiasm can’t be bought!

From a teaching perspective, they are so valuable because the diverse and interesting pieces deliver the opportunity to be creative and talk about musical character and styles whilst using the whole piano, not just 10 keys. The extra content with each piece encourages music education to move outside the square and think about countries and cultures, modulation, tonality, and improvisation, to name a few. They make excellent recital pieces and provide students with an opportunity to sample bite size offerings of different genres along the road of developing their musical taste and technical facility.

Working best alongside the regular instruction method books so that theory continues to be covered, they provide a stepped increase in difficulty throughout the books that neatly delivers students ready for Preliminary. All of my initial trial students have now sat for 2 assessments with terrific memories of what a positive experience their ‘practise exams’ were, so proud of their certificates, brimming with confidence for their next one.

Yvette Baer, AMEB Piano Examiner

Shifting for violin and viola

A common problem I have encountered when examining younger candidates concerns developing good techniques of position changes or shifting. There is often a reluctance to actually shift with the arm and the whole hand, including the thumb. In exercises specifically designed to introduce complete shifts (First Grade Violin Ex. 7, especially (i) and Second Grade Ex 6, 1 and 2, in particular 2 (ii)), or Second Grade Viola 2.2, it is in places quite possible to “get away” with playing them without actually executing a shift at all. The thumb remains happily in the first position, possibly gripping the neck tightly, whilst the rest of the hand and fingers stretch up and as a consequence, the basic frame of hand shape is lost. This makes life almost impossible for the much disadvantaged fourth finger, which is disheartening for our young string players.

In these exercises, the arm, the whole hand and especially the thumb should perform each one of the shifts simultaneously. The thumb should remain flexible, and the basic shape of the hand, whether it is moving up or down, should remain the same.

The technique of executing a half shift, that is stretching the fingers out of one position whilst remaining in the original position with the arm and hand is important, but should probably be developed when the “feel” for each individual position and the basic frame of hand shape is well established.

Another problem is to make clear to the student that a shift performs a technical function necessary for changing position, and unless it is intended as an expressive glissando, it should be as inaudible as possible. This can be achieved by a lightening of bow pressure and a reduction of bow speed at the moment of the shift. This not only facilitates the relaxation of the left hand, which is necessary in performing a shift, but avoids constant and ugly slides at every shift. It is most refreshing and unusual for an examiner to hear all of those numerous scales, particularly in higher grades, performed “cleanly” without too many audible slides.

Wendy Heiligenberg, AMEB Violin and Viola Examiner