Examiners’ Notes

Tips for teachers

The guitarist’s neglected right hand

Performance errors and technical hick-ups can often be traced to an insufficiently prepared right hand rather than the more commonly assumed left. Some examples of potential right hand issues are:

- cross-fingerings instead of a “clean fingering” in a fast run, e.g. A (3rd string) to B (2nd string) played with m-i instead of i-m
- two successive notes played with the same RH finger
- excessive RH movement

While cross-fingerings can surely be mastered by advanced players, they do, in fact, add unnecessary difficulty and obstruct the development of a stable right hand technique for the beginner. Introducing open string exercises from the start is therefore crucial. They help minimize cross-fingerings, secure right hand alternation and apart from establishing the basics they prepare the student for more complex right hand patterns including unavoidable cross-fingerings.

When asked to play a passage right hand alone, the student can process the right hand technique in much more detail. Unfortunate fingerings and other RH imperfections become evident and the passage is consequently learnt with more depth and precision. This provides the student with an invaluable “solution finder” for intricate passages and a learning acceleration tool for new pieces in general.

Encouraging students to make this a regular component of their daily practice will result in an unconstrained right hand which then is on technical par with the left.

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Question: What often does not go to plan in a performance exam?

Answer: Usually the Technical Work Section and the List A.

Can you recall a situation when you ask your students if they have practised their scales at home? Unless you check, you may hear ‘Yes I do’ only to discover two weeks before the exam date the naked truth that the student’s technical work is a disaster and that suddenly C major has two sharps! With most lessons lasting about 30 minutes we can be excused from not hearing every single scale. It is a big task to check all scales with all the required articulations as well as listening to the other Lists as well. There may be time to hear them in the lower grades, but what about in Grades 5 or 6 where scales have the potential to almost take an entire lesson.

Similar issues apply to the studies in List A, often because the student finds it boring to practise a study. How can we remedy this situation?

- Ask your students to play each scale (arpeggio, broken chord) with a different kind of articulation
- Schedule a group lesson where your other students critique each other’s performances and give themselves a grade or comment – perhaps using the AMEB grading criteria
- Organise a concert where only studies or List A pieces are performed
- Ask your student to think (key, tempo, relaxed posture) and prepare before they begin playing. In my experience many students don’t pause for a second to think, but begin to play immediately, and too fast with unfortunate consequences, causing many silly mistakes.

Good luck!

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