

THE PROCESS OF THE EXAM – STRINGS

Presenter: Wendy Heiligenberg

BEFORE THE EXAM

- 1) Preparation for the exam should take all of the Objectives relating to the various Grade Levels as written in the Syllabus into consideration. A positive outcome for an exam will tick all the boxes as far as the dot point lists are concerned, for Section 1 - Technical Work, Section 2 - Studies and Pieces and Extra lists and Section 3 - Aural tests, Sight-reading and General Knowledge. Each Level has different requirements and expectations, and they are clearly described at the beginning of each Level in the Syllabus. Do take the time to study these Objectives carefully, and regularly.
- 2) Ensuring the correct posture and bow hold is essential when playing a stringed instrument. These factors are so important and success in higher grades depends on getting these aspects of technique right from the start.

MEANWHILE at the EXAMINER'S HOME

- 1) Behind the scenes, examiners usually prepare the examination sheets prior to the exam. This enables them to streamline the examination process and accurately ask for the appropriate Technical Work, General Knowledge etc for each Grade and Level. Examiners may be examining up to 10 different Grades and perhaps more than one stringed instrument in one session, so we need to be well prepared too.
- 2) We cannot hear all Technical Work, hence we aim to find a fair cross-section of the required Scales. For example, each Grade has 2-3 tonal centres, so I personally like to ask for most of the straight scales- Major, Melodic Minor, Harmonic Minor - and various bowings from just one initial tonal centre. Then I ask for a Major scale in the new key to centre the intonation and then branch out into the Arpeggii, Dim., Dom., Chrom. and Double Stops.

AT THE EXAM VENUE

- 1) Arriving at the examination venue. It is very important to arrive slightly before the stipulated arrival time - but remember, it is not an overseas trip, and arriving an hour early can contribute to heightening the stress levels of candidates and parents.
- 2) Have the examination slip at the ready to show to the facilitator straight away. Fumbling in 6 different bags, whilst standing at the front of a long line of parents/candidates is frustrating for all parties concerned.
- 3) The warm up rooms are only available for 10 minutes prior to the exam, and there is rarely any flexibility in the availability of rooms, which are in high demand. (Due to lack of warm-up rooms, piano students are unable to warm up at the venue.)
- 4) Ensure that your students are able to, or have assistance in tuning prior to the exam.
- 5) Ensure that the instruments are clean and in absolute tip-top working order for the exam. Examiners often have to assist in the tuning, even conduct minor repairs on instruments, adjust adjustors and tune slipping pegs that the candidates are unable to manage by themselves. This does take time from the already tight examining schedule and adds to stress levels.

THE PROCESS OF THE EXAM – STRINGS

Presenter: Wendy Heiligenberg

- 6) Examiners try to be as upbeat and welcoming as possible, as we all know how difficult it is to perform one's best at an exam, and that is because we, too have done these exams or similar. Expectations are high and as my esteemed Professor in Germany said to me, "If you can play 80% of what you have been able to achieve in your practise room at a performance or at an exam, you should be very happy. "
- 7) So the candidate has entered the examination room, with a clean, perfectly functioning, tuned instrument, they have the music, the accompanist (if playing List pieces first) and they have handed over the slip, which has been filled out appropriately with the choices of List pieces and the Extra List. The examiner carefully checks the candidate's number against his/her list and starting time is registered, and the candidate is given a chance to have a final tune. If the situation arises that the student cannot tune an out of tune instrument, I personally ask if they would like help, as I would rather give the candidate every chance to play well and I do not like conducting a whole exam and trying to assess a candidate's performance on a poorly tuned instrument. We are ready to proceed.

DURING THE EXAM

- 1) Candidates may choose in which order they do their exam - Technical Work first, followed by Section 2 Studies Pieces Extra Lists etc. Alternatively, some candidates (and their accompanists) prefer to do their chosen pieces first. Performing the pieces first does give the student more chance of playing whole pieces. With the latter, the examiner is able to perhaps hear and assess many of the technical requirements embedded within the pieces, for example in our case spiccato, sautillé, double stopping, harmonics, which could then possibly be omitted from being heard during the Section 1 part of the examination.
- 2) For example, Violin Grade 5 and 6 pieces in Series 9 are often extremely long, such that in order for them to be performed in their entirety the examination time would need to be doubled. Examiners are therefore often only able to hear parts of some works. Examiners do try to explain this to the candidates, ensuring that the candidate should not be upset at not being able to perform the whole work. Teachers, please remind the students and parents that this is not a concert, and not being asked to perform a piece in its entirety does not reflect upon the candidate's playing, but on the prescribed time restrictions. (excluding Associate and Licentiate Levels).
- 3) Pieces – Teachers should encourage students to listen to the works they are playing. Modern technology enables us to access so many resources and recordings nowadays, with the touch of a few buttons and in our own home.
- 4) Rehearsing with an accompanist is an expensive business. The AMEB does provide recordings of the earlier grades, which should help in the practicing process. However, nothing replaces performing live with a co-artist, and sharing the musical experience together. This is what making music is about. However it should not be one last minute, rushed get-together.
- 5) Aim to encourage the student to prepare a well-balanced programme of differing style. Particularly in the early Grades, it is sometimes very hard to assess the performances if the candidates play all of the jazz/blues pieces in the Grade books.

THE PROCESS OF THE EXAM – STRINGS

Presenter: Wendy Heiligenberg

For example Grade 2, if Candidates choose List A No 2 Banana skin, List B No 4 Chiquilin de Bachin and List C No 1 Blue Notoriety, followed by Blackberry blossom, List C No 4, students will have only played 20th/21st Century works and moreover can successfully avoid the classic guiding finger shifts. Even the technical work requires this shift in 2 scales only, therefore it is extremely important for the development of the student, both musically and technically to offer them a varied musical experience.

- 6) Ensure that at Level 2 the accompanist is aware that he/she should leave the piano scores in the examination room for the purpose of General Knowledge.

EXTRA LIST

- 1) Once again, it is impossible for the examiner to hear all of the Extra List works. I often am able only to hear just one Extra List piece, or a little of both.
- 2) Try to vary the styles of pieces presented. The exam requirements ask for a well-balanced programme of contrasting styles with regards to List pieces, and I believe we should aim for this in the Extra List as well.

TECHNICAL WORK

- 1) Following all instructions as outlined in the Technical Work Books is essential in preparation for an exam. How often do I ask students if they have read the descriptions of the various technical exercises printed above each individual one. The key to performing the exercises successfully is in these descriptions. Metronome markings should be adhered to as much as possible and fingerings and bowings are obligatory.
- 2) Scales- these should be presented from memory, and this can add to the anxiety of students, so early preparation is essential, ensuring that the scales become second nature.
- 3) Candidates often ignore instructions especially concerning whole bows or metronome markings. Prompt and accurate performance of the technical work at the given tempi is essential for a good outcome of the exam.

EXTRA LIST

- 3) Once again, it is impossible for the examiner to hear all of the Extra List works. I often am able only to hear just one Extra List piece, or a little of both.
- 4) Try to vary the styles of pieces presented. The exam requirements ask for a well balanced programme of contrasting styles with regards to List pieces, and I believe we should aim for this in the Extra List as well.

THE PROCESS OF THE EXAM – STRINGS

Presenter: Wendy Heiligenberg

AURAL TESTS

This topic has been handled prior to this presentation.

- 1) Start preparation as early as possible. AMEB recordings available.
- 2) Include aural training embedded within the preparation of the pieces. For example getting the student to sing the intervals they need to play, or pointing out the chords involved within the arpeggii etc.

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

Once again, this topic has been extensively addressed prior to this presentation.

- 1) 6-10 questions
- 2) Level 2 questions from the piano part please.
- 3) Know the requirements for each grade thoroughly- Candidates are often very taken aback when asked questions particularly in style (GR 5 and 6)

AFTER THE EXAM

Examiners also spend time after the exams reading and refining the reports.