

## The Next Grade – Ready or Not?

**It's a question I get asked a lot:**

*When can I/my child start working on the next grade?*

Getting the timing right on this is very important. It makes the difference between a student loving learning the piano and hating it, embracing the exam experience and dreading it, making steady progress and hardly moving on at all, or even regressing.

Every child develops and learns at different rates. Some just have a 'knack' for it whilst others need to work twice as hard. The range of attainment level/student age that I see in my teaching is astounding. But it's important to remember that this should be about music making and is not a competition or race to get to the highest grade possible. I know I'd much rather hear a grade one tune played beautifully than a shaky attempt at a grade five piece. Music and the joy of playing it should be the priority.

That said, I acknowledge that there is a need, both for personal and academic reasons for formal assessment. I myself took great pride in doing instrumental exams. But the timing needs to be right so that the exam process is a celebration and confirmation of student attainment, rather than a long uphill battle.

Some students or parents think that going for the next grade will give them something to aim for and make them practise more. My experience shows this not to be the case and to have a negative effect on the development of skills, understanding and musicianship. I have found that embarking on an exam syllabus before a student is ready results in:

- **Decreased motivation and practising.** After the initial excitement and pride in embarking on the next grade, the student quickly finds that they are out of their depth. Consequently, they are unable to do very much independently and need to rely heavily on teacher input. They know that the practice work they have been set is too hard and so avoid doing it.
- **Exam preparation taking too long.** Ideally, it should take two terms to prepare for grades one to five. Any longer can be because the student is not practising enough, but is usually because their ability level was not secure enough to start working on that grade. This results in exam prep taking three terms (a year) or even longer. Lesson times are eaten up with painstakingly learning tunes note by note from the teacher and going over the same points week after week. This becomes a real slog for the student and they start to find lessons very boring and practising the last thing they want to do. The outcome is usually a hard-to-break vicious circle of tedious lessons and insufficient practise.
- **Regression of reading skills.** The student struggles to read the music and so needs all the notes written down and rhythms interpreted for them. Then, so that they don't need to read the difficult music, they memorise the pieces. After a year (or longer) of learning to play tunes in this way, the net result, having completed the exam, is that they've lost most of the reading skills they were developing before exam work commenced.
- **Supporting tests being compromised:** Poor reading skills lead to big problems with the sight reading element of the exam. Worse still, as their chances of getting a good mark for this test are low, there is greater pressure to do better in the other elements, to get an overall pass. Also, as so much valuable lesson time is consumed with learning the pieces, very little, if any, time is left to devote to practising the sight reading and aural tests.

- **Superficial attainment.** The student may get through the exam, with lots of teacher input and parental encouragement but if they have rote learned the pieces and taken a long time to do so, they are not genuinely at that level. This means that, post exam, even when the student is given easier tunes to play, they find them very hard and take a long time to learn them. A term goes by doing this and then comes the question...  
'When can I start working on the next grade?'

### **Why does there need to be a gap between working on exams?**

Learning an instrument doesn't work in the same way as other extra-curricular learning, such as swimming, martial arts, ballet etc., where you move on to the next syllabus as soon as you've passed a grade. The next grade up is a big jump and skills need to be developed before the pieces can be embarked upon. The technical elements (scales and arpeggios) for the next grade can be worked on straight away as you can start from the scales in common with the previous grade and build on. But playing skills must be developed by learning 'between grade' pieces. In addition, learning pieces of lower grades is invaluable for speeding up reading, becoming an independent learner, developing musical expression and exploring different musical genres. I also encourage students to learn other skills such as how to interpret chord symbols, by playing pop/rock tunes of their choice, as this is an essential skill for a musician.

This is a great opportunity for the student to have a say in the types of music they play and to really enjoy music making. I encourage them to make the learning process a collaborative one by offering lots of choice so that they can take ownership of their learning and be the musician they really want to be.

### **So, how *can* I tell when I/my child is ready to start on the next grade?**

In my opinion, a student is showing readiness to move to the next grade syllabus when they're roughly halfway between grades, when they can demonstrate a solid 'skill set' and knowledge of their last grade and are building on that. This can be determined if the student:

- Can learn a piece at the grade below the last grade they took (e.g. a grade 1 piece if their last grade was grade 2), with minimal teacher input, in about two–three weeks.
- Can learn a piece at the grade they last took, with some teacher input in about four–five weeks.
- Has 'appropriate-for-grade' note recognition. The app 'Note Rush' is good for assessing this.
- Can play the scales and arpeggios which were in the previous grade that are still in the next grade and have learned a few of the new scales for the next grade.
- Has a good pace of progress, demonstrated by learning lots of pieces in between exam preparation and showing evidence of regular, effective practising.

### **It's been two terms since my child last took an exam and they're still not ready. Why is this?**

Typically, students take one to two terms between working for a grade exam and so take exams every three to four terms. When it takes longer, there can be several reasons:

- **Lack of practise.** This is the most common reason for slower-than-expected progress. It simply is not possible to learn an instrument just by attending lessons. Most of the learning happens at home; lessons offer the opportunity for the student to show what they have learned and to work with the teacher on issues that have arisen in practice and get help with learning the next section/piece. If the home-learning is not done, then lessons become reruns of previous weeks and progress is very slow.
- **Not practising effectively.** The most common mistakes students make are:
  - a) playing tunes through, thinking that will improve them,
  - b) playing things they can *already* play rather than things they have yet to master,

c) not reading the teacher's lesson notes which sum up learning points and offer tips and advice.

- **Lack of attention and application in lessons.** Attention levels make an enormous difference in speed of learning. The students that make the fastest progress are the ones who give full attention to the lesson. They do not allow other things to distract them and do not distract themselves. They value everything the teacher is saying as necessary for their success and don't dismiss any learning points as 'unimportant' (e.g. getting fingerings or rhythms right). They quietly sit when the teacher is writing in the notebook and continue to listen and focus on the points being made.  
This might all sound a bit 'Victorian' but behaviour such as being distracted, fiddling, interrupting (verbally or on the instrument, or not waiting for the teacher to finish) seriously undermines the assimilation of new skills and information.
- **The work is too hard.** Teachers aim to set students 'doable' targets to work on at home. This is to foster a 'can-do' attitude, boost motivation, promote independent learning and make practising enjoyable and rewarding. If the work is too hard, as mentioned above, it can have the exact opposite effect. This is usually the result of students trying to take exams before they're ready or of having just slogged through a too-difficult exam.
- **Developmental stages.** In my teaching, I do notice that young students go through phases of being able to focus and make excellent progress followed by periods where concentration and motivation decreases and they plateau for a while. A long gap between exams could simply be down to this.
- **Not wanting to take exams.** Some students do make good progress but simply prefer not to take exams. Some students simply want to learn for enrichment and are not concerned about how 'high' they can get. This is a matter that needs to be discussed with the student, parents and teacher, to establish a clear long-term plan that everyone is happy with.
- **Other commitments/issues.** School exams, sporting commitments, starting secondary school, holidays, illness, personal/family issues etc., can all affect a student's progress, mainly because practising goes out the window. If the student knows that something like this is forthcoming, plans can be made to maintain progress through busy or difficult times.

### How can I help my child make faster progress?

It may seem hard to support your child when they're learning an instrument, especially if you have little or no musical training yourself. But you can make a big difference in their rate of progress by:

- **Helping work out a practice regime.** Help your child organise their study time so that practise sessions conveniently fit into their day. Then try to remind them when to practise.
- **Looking in their notebook each week.** If they've had a 'well done', give them praise and encouragement. If you notice that they're being asked to repeat work from the previous week(s), talk about the possible reasons and make sure you support them when practising.
- **Supporting their practise sessions.** This doesn't mean standing over them the whole time! Have a look in their notebook and specify two things you want to hear them working on. The occasional 'that sounded good' or 'just do that a few more times' will help them stay motivated and on course.

You should be hearing a few scales and some work on pieces. This means small sections of pieces repeated over and over until they start to sound better. If you are hearing your child playing through an entire piece, you can bet they're not practising properly. Go back to the notebook, check what the targets are and remind your child what they should be doing!

- **Understanding other demands on the student's life.** As mentioned above, there may be other things that are going on in the student's life which need/have to be prioritised over practising. These demands should be taken into account when forming expectations for taking grade exams and may be a reason for taking a longer gap.

- **Providing rewards.** Extra pocket money, a friend coming round, a trip out – whatever will give them that extra push to go and practice!
- **Reading *Miranda's Guide to Successful Piano Practice!*** Although aimed at students, this is a very useful guide for productive and time-efficient practice, with tips for how long to practise, strategies, dos and don'ts etc. Although aimed at piano students, the advice is relevant to students of other instruments.

#### **In short...**

I hope that this article has been useful. To sum up, the following points should be considered when planning for exams:

- A student is ready to start working on the next grade when they are securely between grades.
- Preparing for and taking an exam before they are ready is usually demotivating, unenjoyable and impedes real progress.
- The period between exam preparation is essential for students to develop their skills towards the next level and to explore other areas of music and music making.
- If progress is slower than desired, try to find the reason and address any issues that are affecting the pace of attainment.
- Support your child in their practice at home to promote faster progress.
- Remember, doing grades is not a contest. Learning an instrument should primarily be about making music and the personal and emotional enrichment that is gained from it.