

Who Needs Grade Exams?

Short answer: No-one!

Longer answer: You do!

Well, you do if you want to:

- a) have a focus for your practice,
- b) have a ready-made, universally-understood way of measuring your progress,
- c) be able to compare your standard of playing with other people's – and for GCSE and A-level music performances,
- d) acquire a row of highly-impressive, gold-blocked certificates to put on your bedroom wall.

In my view, all these reasons are good ones. Do you know the main reason that some people give up learning to play their instrument? It's lack of motivation. And yet nobody goes along to their very first lesson with no motivation to learn. Do you remember your first lesson on your instrument? You were probably excited, enthusiastic, keen as mustard. Then, when it was over, you couldn't wait to get home and practise everything you'd learnt. This state of affairs usually lasts several weeks or months, but there comes a time when the novelty has worn off, you've progressed to a point where the work has become 'difficult', and – common to teenagers, this one – other aspects of your life are competing for your time.

So what do you do about it? Well, there are two options. You give up, or you carry on anyway. Grade exams can provide super-motivation now. And even more so, if you've already got a couple of Grades under your belt before the *weltschmerz* kicks in. (*Weltschmerz*? Kind of world-weariness. It's German. Bet you've felt that way sometimes.) So, just when you're about to psych yourself up to tell your teacher that, actually, you've decided not to continue with your bandoneon lessons, he springs it on you that you'll be doing your Grade 4 in two months' time, so you'd better buckle

down and learn your scales, hadn't you. And suddenly it all seems worth doing again! The bandoneon, which has been sulking in its case for the last five weeks, gets hauled out, dusted off and a few faltering, rusty scales are heard, to the amazement of your family, who'd honestly thought you'd lost the damned thing. A-ha! Not so fast, my friend. The bandoneon lives to fight another Grade! Grade 4, no less. That's half-way, isn't it? Pretty good, huh?

Looking at reasons b) and c) – well, what is there to say? Of course everyone wants to know how they're doing. And how they compare with all the other people. Are you in an ensemble, a band or an orchestra? If not, why not? You should be! But if you are, I bet you quite often find out, whether directly or indirectly, how your achievements measure up to everyone else's. Maybe the conductor will move you on to First Flute once you've got your Grade 5. After all, most of the First Flutes are Grade 5 and above, so you'll be proving something once you get yours. Grade exams improve your technique. Learning pieces is fun, playing in the orchestra is really good fun, but learning scales, technical studies, improving sight-reading and aural skills, these things make you a *better musician*, and get you noticed by conductors and musical directors. And – because Grade exams are universally known and understood – when you wave your Grade 5 certificate at the boss, he'll know exactly what you can do and what to expect from you. A brilliant system.

Our final reason is the not-insignificant matter of decoration. Maybe your bedroom walls are already filled up with posters of One Direction or Wayne Rooney. Now think how much better your walls would look with the heraldry of your chosen exam board, your own name in bold, even gothic, lettering, and the steady march of progress from Grade 1 to Grade 8 chronicled for all to see! *This* is the outcome of all that hard work. *This* is the proof that you are a musician, that you don't stand still, that you have put in the graft, that you have the ability to succeed. You've worked for these certificates, and you are proud to show them off. And so you should be. Grade exams are popular because they work. They give focus and motivation; they are understood by musicians all over the world; they work across exam boards, across instruments, across continents. You don't have to start at Grade 1 (some exam boards have a pre-grade 1 exam, called Initial or Debut or Preparatory). You certainly shouldn't think that your learning finishes with Grade 8, because there really is lots more to learn after that. But – you *should* be proud of each and every achievement,

whether it's passing a Grade exam, performing in a concert, composing a song, conducting your local choir, or making a platinum disc. See my post on **Success**, and good luck with your music!