

PIANO GRADES: requirements and information

This section provides a summary of the most important points that teachers and candidates need to know when taking ABRSM graded Piano exams. Further details, as well as administrative information relating to the exams, are given in ABRSM's Exam Regulations (available at www.abrsm.org/examregulations) which should be read before an exam booking is made.

Entering for an exam

Eligibility: There are eight grades of exam for Piano and candidates may be entered for any grade irrespective of age and without previously having taken any other grade in Piano. Candidates for a Grade 6, 7 or 8 exam must already have passed ABRSM Grade 5 (or above) in Music Theory, Practical Musicianship or a solo Jazz instrument; for full details, including a list of accepted alternatives, see www.abrsm.org/prerequisite.

Access: ABRSM endeavours to make its exams as accessible as possible to all candidates, regardless of sensory impairments, learning difficulties or particular physical needs. There is a range of alternative tests and formats as well as sets of guidelines for candidates with particular access needs (see www.abrsm.org/specificneeds). Where a candidate's needs are not covered by the guidelines, each case is considered on an individual basis. Further information is available from the Access Co-ordinator (accesscoordinator@abrsm.ac.uk).

Exam booking: Details of exam dates, locations, fees and how to book an exam are available online at www.abrsm.org/exambooking.

Instruments

ABRSM Centres provide a piano suitable for exam purposes. The piano will be upright or grand. Practice before the exam cannot be arranged, but examiners will recognize that the instrument may be one to which candidates are unaccustomed. When exams are held at Visits (i.e. premises provided by the Applicant and visited by the examiner), a suitable piano must be provided. A digital piano may be used, provided it has a clearly recognizable piano tone, a touch-sensitive keyboard with full-size weighted keys, and an action, compass and facilities that match those of a conventional acoustic piano, including a sustaining pedal.

Elements of the exam

All ABRSM graded Piano exams comprise the following elements: three Pieces; Scales and arpeggios/broken chords; Sight-reading; and Aural tests. In all grades, marks are allocated as follows:

Pieces: 1	30
2	30
3	30
Scales and arpeggios/broken chords	21
Sight-reading	21
Aural tests	18
Total	150

Marking scheme: 100 marks are required for a Pass, 120 for a Merit and 130 for a Distinction. A Pass in each individual section is not required to pass overall. See pp. 42–43 for the marking criteria used by examiners.

Pieces

Programme planning: Candidates must choose one piece from each of the three lists (A, B and C) in each grade. In the exam, they should inform the examiner which pieces they are performing, and they are welcome to use the form on p. 45 for this purpose.

Every effort has been made to ensure the syllabus lists feature a broad range of repertoire, with items to suit and appeal to candidates of differing ages, backgrounds and interests. Not every piece will be suitable for every candidate due to technical reasons (e.g. hand size) or wider context (historical, cultural, subject matter of the larger work from which it is drawn, lyrics if an arrangement of a song etc.). It is advised that pieces selected are considered carefully for their appropriateness to each individual, which may require consultation between teachers and parents/guardians. Given the ever-changing nature of the digital world, teachers and parents/guardians should also exercise caution when allowing younger candidates to research items online: www.nspcc.org.uk/onlinesafety.

Exam music & editions: Wherever the syllabus includes an arrangement or transcription, the edition listed in the syllabus must be used in the exam; in all such cases the abbreviation ‘arr.’ or ‘trans.’ appears in the syllabus entry. For all other pieces, the editions quoted in the syllabus are given for guidance only and candidates may use any edition of their choice (in- or out-of-print or downloadable). Information on obtaining exam music is given on p. 13.

Interpreting the score: Printed editorial suggestions such as fingering, metronome marks, realization of ornaments etc. need not be strictly observed. Whether the piece contains musical indications or not, candidates are always encouraged to interpret the score in a stylistically appropriate manner. Ultimately, examiners’ marking will be determined by consideration of pitch, time, tone, shape and performance, and how control of these contributes to the overall musical outcome.

Pedalling: The use and control of pedalling, and its effect on tone and shape, will be taken into account by examiners, who will be assessing the overall musical outcome rather than the strict observance of any printed pedal indications (which may therefore be adapted or omitted, as appropriate). Pieces whose full musical effect is heavily reliant on pedalling (whether marked in the music or not) should be avoided if appropriate pedalling cannot be managed.

Hand stretch: Candidates should choose the most suitable pieces for their hand size from the syllabus lists. If necessary, they may occasionally adapt the music by ‘spreading’ chords or omitting notes at wide stretches, provided the result is musically satisfactory.

Repeats: All da capo and dal segno indications should be observed but all other repeats (including first-time bars) should be omitted unless they are very brief (i.e. of a few bars) or unless the syllabus specifies otherwise.

Performing from memory: Candidates are free to perform any of their pieces from memory; in such cases they must ensure that a copy of the music is available for the examiner to refer to if necessary. No additional marks are awarded for playing from memory.

Page-turns: Examiners will be understanding if a page-turn causes a lack of continuity during a piece, and this will not affect the marking. A variety of solutions for awkward page-turns exists, including the use of an additional copy of the music or a photocopy of a section of the piece (but see 'Photocopies' below). In cases where candidates at Grades 6–8 believe there is no solution to a particularly awkward page-turn, they may bring a page-turner to the exam (prior permission is not required; the turner may be a candidate's teacher). Examiners are unable to help with page-turning.

Photocopies: Performing from unauthorized photocopies (or other kinds of copies) of copyright editions is not allowed. ABRSM may withhold the exam result where it has evidence of an illegal copy (or copies) being used. In the UK, copies may be used in certain limited circumstances – for full details, see the MPA's *Code of Fair Practice* at www.mpaonline.org.uk. In all other cases, application should be made to the copyright holder before any copy is made, and evidence of permission received should be brought to the exam.

Scales and arpeggios/broken chords

Examiners will usually ask for at least one of each type of scale/arpeggio/broken chord etc. required at each grade and will ask for majors followed by minors within each type. They will also ask to hear a balance of the hand requirements and, in Grades 6–8, of the specified articulations across the requests as a whole. When asking for requirements, examiners will specify:

- the key (including minor form – harmonic *or* melodic – in the Grade 6–8 scales) or the starting note
- left hand *or* right hand, *or* hands together
- the articulation (where chosen by the examiner)

All scales, arpeggios and broken chords should:

- be played from memory
- be played in even notes (with the exception of the Grade 1 broken-chord pattern)
- ascend and descend according to the specified range (and pattern)
- be prepared legato, unless the syllabus specifies staccato (or both)
- be played without pedalling

Candidates are welcome to use any fingering that produces a successful musical outcome.

Candidates are free to start at any octave, provided the required ranges are covered. For all 'hands together' requirements, the hands should be one octave apart, unless otherwise indicated.



Arpeggios and dominant sevenths are required in root position only, except where otherwise indicated. Scales in thirds or a third apart should begin with the tonic as the lower note, while scales in sixths or a sixth apart should begin with the tonic as the upper note.

Books of the requirements are published for Piano by ABRSM for each grade.

The following speeds are given as a general guide:

	Grade / Speed*							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Scales (incl. contrary-motion, chromatic & whole-tone)	♩ = 60	♩ = 66	♩ = 80	♩ = 52	♩ = 63	♩ = 76	♩ = 80	♩ = 88
Arpeggios (incl. broken chords, dom. & dim. 7ths)	♩ = 46	♩ = 63	♩ = 69	♩ = 76	♩ = 88	♩ = 50	♩ = 56	♩ = 66
Scales in 3rds						♩ = 52	♩ = 46	♩ = 52
Scales a 3rd apart							♩ = 60	♩ = 63
Scales in 6ths / a 6th apart							♩ = 52	♩ = 63
Chromatic scales a minor 3rd apart								♩ = 76
Chromatic scale in minor 3rds								♩ = 52

(continued overleaf)

* All speeds relate to the rhythmic grouping , except for broken chords in Grade 1, where  applies.

Sight-reading

Candidates will be asked to play a short unaccompanied piece of music which they have not previously seen. They will be given half a minute in which to look through and, if they wish, try out all or any part of the test before they are required to play it for assessment. The table below shows the introduction of elements at each grade. Please note that these parameters are presented cumulatively, i.e. once introduced they apply for all subsequent grades (albeit within a logical progression of difficulty).

For practice purposes, books of sample sight-reading tests are published for Piano by ABRSM for each grade.

Grade	Length (bars)	Time	Keys	Hand position	Other features that may be included
1	4	4/4 3/4	C, G, F majors A, D minors	Each hand: • playing separately • in 5-finger position	Simple: • dynamics • note values • articulations Occasional accidentals (within minor keys only)
	6	2/4			
2			D major E, G minors	Hands playing together	• dotted notes • tied notes
3	up to 8	3/8	A, B \flat , E \flat majors B minor	Hands playing together outside 5-finger position	• 2-note chords in either hand
4	c. 8	6/8			• anacrusis • chromatic notes • pause signs • tenuto
5	c. 8–12		E, A \flat majors F \sharp , C minors		• 4-part chords (2 notes max. in either hand) • simple syncopation • slowing of tempo at end
6	c. 12–16	9/8 5/8 5/4	C \sharp , F minors		• triplet rhythms • clef changes • use of right pedal
7	c. 16–20	7/8 7/4			• tempo changes • 8va sign • use of una corda pedal
8	c. 1 page	12/8	B, D \flat majors		• 3-part chords in either hand • spread chords • simple ornaments

Aural tests

The requirements are the same for all subjects. Full details of the Aural tests are given on pp. 30–35.

In the exam

Examiners: Generally, there will be one examiner in the exam room; however, for training and quality assurance purposes, a second examiner may sometimes be present. Examiners may ask to look at the music before or after the performance of a piece (a separate copy is not required: the candidate's copy will suffice). Examiners may stop the performance of a piece when they have heard enough to form a judgment. They will not issue or discuss a candidate's result; instead, the mark form (and certificate for successful candidates) will be issued by ABRSM after the exam.

Before beginning: Candidates are welcome to adjust the piano stool height (the examiner will be happy to help with this if necessary) and to play a few notes to try out and get used to the piano.

Order of the exam: The individual sections of the exam may be taken in any order, at the candidate's choice.

Assessment

The tables on pp. 42–43 show the marking criteria used by examiners. In each element of the exam, ABRSM operates the principle of marking from the required pass mark positively or negatively, rather than awarding marks by deduction from the maximum or addition from zero. In awarding marks, examiners balance the extent to which the qualities and skills listed on pp. 42–43 (broadly categorized by pitch, time, tone, shape and performance) are demonstrated and contribute towards the overall musical outcome.

Obtaining exam music

Exam music is available from music retailers as well as online, including at the ABRSM music shop: www.abrsm.org/shop. Every effort has been made to ensure that all the publications listed will remain available for the duration of the syllabus. Candidates are advised to obtain their music well in advance of the exam in case of any delays with items not kept in stock by retailers. Apart from queries relating to exams, all enquiries about the music (e.g. editorial, availability) should be addressed to the relevant publisher: contact details are listed at www.abrsm.org/publishers.

AURAL TESTS: included in the Practical exams for all subjects

Listening lies at the heart of all good music-making. Developing aural awareness is fundamental to musical training because having a ‘musical ear’ impacts on all aspects of musicianship. Singing, both silently in the head and out loud, is one of the best ways to develop the ‘musical ear’. It connects the internal imagining of sound, the ‘inner ear’, with the external creation of it, without the necessity of mechanically having to ‘find the note’ on an instrument (important though that connection is). By integrating aural activities in imaginative ways in the lesson, preparation for the aural tests within an exam will be a natural extension of what is already an essential part of the learning experience.

In the exam

Aural tests are an integral part of all Practical graded exams.

The tests are administered by the examiner from the piano. For any test that requires a sung response, pitch rather than vocal quality is being assessed. The examiner will be happy to adapt to the vocal range of the candidate, whose responses may be sung to any vowel (or consonant followed by a vowel), hummed or whistled (and at a different octave, if appropriate).

Assessment

Some tests allow for a second attempt or for an additional playing by the examiner, if necessary. The examiner will also be ready to prompt, where helpful, although this may affect the assessment.

Marks are not awarded for each individual test or deducted for mistakes; instead they reflect the candidate’s overall response in this section. The marking criteria for the aural tests are given on p. 43.

Specimen tests

Examples of the tests are given in *Specimen Aural Tests* and *Aural Training in Practice* (from 2011), available for purchase from music retailers and from www.abrsm.org/shop.

Deaf or hearing-impaired candidates

Deaf or hearing-impaired candidates may choose alternative tests in place of the standard tests, if requested at the time of entry. Further information, including the syllabus for the alternative tests, is available at www.abrsm.org/specificneeds.