

FOR

There are lots of bad things about exams, it's true. For one thing, they can be pretty stressful – and stress is the enemy of relaxed and enjoyable learning. Then there's the feeling among teachers that no exam ever quite seems to fit the student: if it's not the sight-reading causing problems then it's the aural tests – and best not to mention the scales. Even worse, exam syllabuses often get used as entire schemes of teaching, reducing lessons to little more than a treadmill of preparing pupils for assessment after assessment. (Parent: 'What are you playing at the moment?' Child: 'Nothing. I've forgotten my Grade 2 pieces but I don't know my Grade 3 pieces yet.')

But are these things really the fault of exams? Playing in front of an examiner can indeed be stressful, but so can playing for any audience. And examiners have come a long way since the bow tie and tweed era; nowadays, a warm welcome and an encouraging demeanour are both vital parts of the training.

It's true that exams sometimes don't fit students' needs, but that's often because teachers don't choose well from the wide range of assessments on offer. There are now exams for jazz and rock musicians as well as classical, and some boards offer improvisation and other creative options instead of the beloved sight-reading and aural tests. Indeed, most boards are moving towards a more progressive, candidate-centred way of examining, so if you've had a bad experience, it might be because you haven't found the right exam board yet.

No one, least of all the exam boards, would argue that music exams are for everybody. But for many learners, exams are a valuable source of motivation. They are also an opportunity to explore different and unusual repertoire, and play it well; and, of course, they are an independent validation of musical progress, serving to reassure teachers

To test or not to test?

Just how important is assessment to the aspiring piano player? *Music Teacher* editor **Christopher Walters** and tutor **Jenny Macmillan** turn over their papers and pen their arguments for and against the music exam

and students alike that things are moving in the right direction.

For better or worse, we live in a culture where assessments matter. The perceived need to brandish a Grade 5 certificate on arrival at senior school may well be the reason why unimaginative teachers still plod through the grades, but let's not forget that this is an issue of bad teaching, not bad assessment. Good teachers have always used exams as just one of the many elements that make up a varied musical diet. Teaching this way may not be easy, but it is possible – and essential.

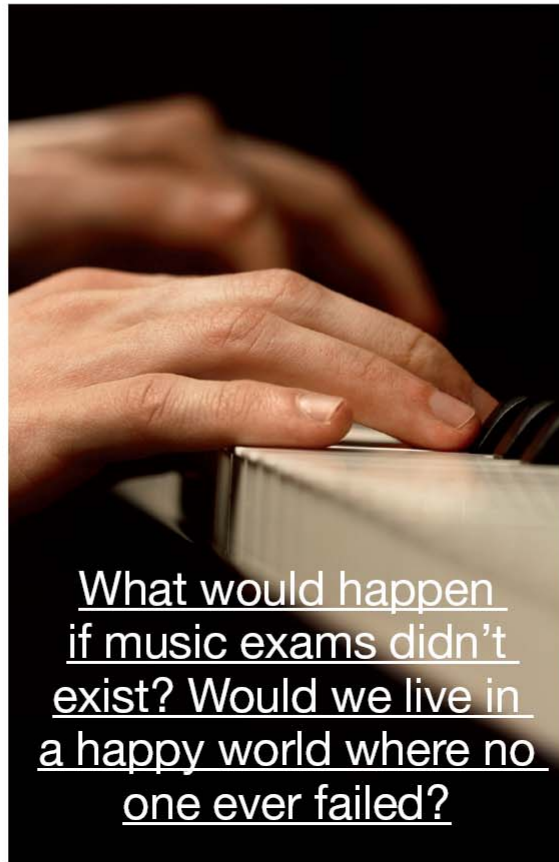
What would happen if music exams didn't exist? Would we live in a happy world where no one ever failed? Perhaps, but this would not suit everybody. Music rarely offers a quick route to achievement, so those who do attain high standards deserve a rigorous and respected benchmark to acknowledge their hard work – whether they have achieved Grade 1 or Grade 8. No one has to take music exams, but for those who want them, they provide an important service.

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AGAINST

Teachers have to balance the conflicting demands of what parents want and what children need. Experienced, confident and imaginative teachers will be able to convince parents of good progress without the need for exam results.

Exams offer little flexibility, especially in scales and reading. In the early stages, it is more important to teach prepared reading than reading at sight – no one can read well at sight until they can extract all the relevant information from the page. This skill doesn't lend itself to being tested; it is better in the early



years not to test at all, but to spend lesson time developing the necessary reading skills.

Scales, too, are restricted by exam requirements. Some of us prefer to teach all 12 major scales around the circle of fifths, followed by the 12 harmonic and 12 melodic minors. And we prefer to keep the hands separate for scales and arpeggios until they are well mastered. Exam boards require scales to be played hands together at an early stage, so youngsters struggle with the correct fingering, never mind playing with good technique and listening for a beautiful sound. Without the pressure of an imminent exam, teachers can judge for themselves how pupils should progress through their scales.

Everyone would agree that positive performance experiences are important for budding musicians. I appreciate that examiners now are more 'human' than in the past, but it is still an unreal and

often unpleasant situation for a child to be judged by one person. I much prefer the idea of regular concerts at which children perform to fellow pupils, family and friends, followed by a tea party. If children are always well prepared and play regularly in informal concerts from an early age, they build up a bank of positive performing experiences that helps them overcome nerves that could develop as they get older. Playing in concerts motivates children to practise well; listening to others a little older or more advanced is inspirational; a party afterwards means music becomes part of their social life. Parents are able to see and hear their children's progress in a real situation, and can share experiences with parents of other young musicians. Teachers can award certificates of achievement.

In my studio, almost no one takes a piano exam until Grade

8, at around the age of 13 to 16. We work at all the elements required for exams but in the way and at the pace that suits each pupil, with no stress to be at a certain level by a certain time.

It is necessary to be highly confident to teach without using exams. Teachers who take this approach may have followed several courses in order to have many ideas about what to do with pupils. Teaching to the exam syllabus may be an easy option for the teacher lacking in confidence or experience – it is very easy to simply follow the structure of the exams. As with everything, the more someone puts into their teaching, the more the teacher and the pupil get out of it. 🎵

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