

Going Online - Examinations

I recently hosted my first ESA Piano Exams on Zoom, following the ESA's acceptance of on-line examinations for Suzuki teachers. My view, and that of the other examiners and the trainees, was that the online exams worked extremely well.

I had four exams, one at each of the first four levels.

Prior to the exam itself, each examinee **videoed themselves** performing the **Twinkle variations, graduation piece, and two other pieces from their level** which I had agreed with the two external examiners.

Each then **uploaded a single video of all their performances** onto YouTube and I forwarded the four links to the examiners.

I arranged for the examinees each to **teach a child of their level on Zoom**, I recorded the lessons, **put them onto YouTube**, and forwarded the links to the examiners.

Each examinee had also **produced a portfolio of all the written work** specified by the ESA for their level. I emailed the portfolios as attachments to the examiners.

These were **all sent several weeks in advance of the exams**, so there was no rush for the examiners to study the performances, lessons and portfolios.

It was clear in the exams that the examiners had studied the material. They referred several times to specific elements in the trainees' submissions, whether performance, teaching or written work, and asked specific and relevant questions in the viva voce part of the exam.

I felt this was far better than the norm where examiners of a Level 1 exam have 30 minutes to hear the performance, watch a lesson, skim through the written work, and conduct a viva; then 15 minutes to fill in the report. In my experience, the whole thing ends up in a rush. The written assignments which the candidate has carefully prepared and presented are barely looked at, and there is very little time for any in-depth discussion – everything is done as speedily as possible.

Normally, because several of my train-

ees as well as the examiners come from abroad, I run the exams during my week-long training course, and take the opportunity to invite at least one of the examiners to teach on the course, both to benefit from their expertise and also to help cover the exam expenses. As we were online, it was not necessary to schedule the exams during the course and so we could be more expansive.

Being online, I felt more of an onus not to overrun, so I had allowed more time than was necessary for the higher levels. **Ideal timing** would allow a **total of 45 minutes for each level**, i.e. about **15-20 minutes viva** with the examinee, and **25-30 minutes to discuss and write up the report**. These parts of the exam (the viva and writing the report) don't take longer for the higher levels – it's the performing, and to some extent the teaching, of longer pieces that take more time.

I agreed with the examiners in advance that I would pay them double the normal ESA rate of €40 an hour, ie €80 an hour of examination contact time, to allow for the time they would have to spend in advance to prepare for the exam. As I didn't have to pay for their travel to the UK, the cost was similar to what I usually pay for the examiners' fees and travel combined.

The examiners reported that, although it was less easy to assess tone quality when watching performances on YouTube compared with live performances, they felt it was perfectly acceptable. They preferred to see the candidates playing in the video under less stressful circumstances than live in an exam. However, in future, if the examiners wished, they could ask the candidate to perform a piece live during the exam. Having already heard their pre-recorded performances, it wouldn't be too critical if the sound quality were poor.

The examiners very much appreciated being able to look through the portfolios of written work in advance (I always send the portfolios in advance anyway). The examiners said conducting a viva voce online felt

perfectly natural.

The area that was least satisfactory was that of the trainees giving lessons, where the quality of sound over Zoom was often not good. However, the examiners felt they could still see the quality of the teaching and were able to identify areas to discuss with the candidate. The quality of Zoom transmission may well improve over time as broadband speeds rise.

As one examiner said to me afterwards: *"The more relaxed atmosphere of the exam facilitated more sincere communication between examiner and examinee while maintaining the overall level of excellence"*.

All four examinees reported that, generally, they felt this was a good way forward for exams. While one candidate felt it seemed an easy option not to have to perform live in the exam, another reported that having to work extra hard on a few pieces to produce near-perfect videos helped them improve their playing skills. They all very much welcomed the more detailed discussion during the viva. They all knew they were well prepared, and one trainee described the exam experience as being like the cherry on top of the cake of her training.

We don't know for how long travel and face-to-face contact will continue to be difficult. But it could be a long time – perhaps several years – before we feel we can book examiners in advance and for them to be willing to commit to booking their flights. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect examiners to travel to exams. I would be very happy to continue with exams on Zoom for the foreseeable future. Already it seems outdated to fly in two external examiners from different countries.



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Now training is taking place online, teachers from all over the world are welcome to observe.

See more on www.jennymacmillan.co.uk