

Singing exams- everything you ever needed to know (and more)

Grades 1-3

Format

1. For grades 1-5 you have to sing three songs with the piano; for grades 6-8 you sing four. These are performed off-by-heart and are practised in lessons in advance. We will choose the pieces together – they must be contrasting but also you must like them!!
2. You also have to perform an unaccompanied folk song (i.e. no piano). Again we prepare this in advance but I cannot be in the room while you sing it. It is a test of whether you can stay in tune without the piano and whether you can convey the story of the song effectively.
3. Sight reading is the bit everyone hates. The examiner gives you a short piece of music that you have never seen before and half a minute to look at it. You then sing it straight off with the examiner accompanying you on the piano, to the word 'la'. It is important that you not only sing the right notes but also add in dynamics, expression etc. Whilst I cannot guess which piece you will be given in the exam, there are specimen pieces that exist to help teach you the skills in advance.
4. Aural tests – listening tests. There are four questions that broadly cover the following areas:
 - A. Tapping the pulse - the examiner plays a short tune on the piano; you clap along with the beat and then state if it is in 2 (marching) or 3 (waltz) time. For grade 2 you also have to know 6/8 time and for grade 3 9/8 time. Again, we will do these in advance.
 - B. Singing an echo – you repeat a short melody to 'la'. Naturally these get progressively harder as the grades advance.
 - C. Identifying changes – a short tune is played and then repeated with something altered in the rhythm (grade 1) or rhythm OR melody (grades 2&3). You have to describe to the examiner as clearly as possible what the change was e.g. at the beginning of the tune, the second note was higher on the second playing.
 - D. Identifying features of a piece – again a short piece is played and the examiner will ask you one or two questions about various musical elements. They will give you an idea in advance of what you are to look out for – although I never do when we try them as it makes you think more!!! It is very important that you try to use the relevant Italian terms in your answer. They are listed below, along with a typical question and answer. You need to memorise these words.

They can ask you about:

Dynamics – louds and softs; **forte (loud) or piano (soft)**

Gradation of tone – literally the gradient of the dynamics, i.e. how did the volume get there? Was it a gradual increase or decrease or sudden?

Crescendo (gradually getting louder) or diminuendo (gradually getting quieter).

Articulation – **smooth playing (legato) or detached “dotty” playing (staccato).**

For grade 2 they add tempo (speed) changes:

Ritardando or rallentando means getting slower; accelerando is getting faster

For grade 3 they add recognition of major (happy) and minor (sad) tonality.

So, a typical question might be: “where was the loudest part of the piece?”

You reply “the loudest, **forte**, part of the piece was (for example) the beginning.”

They might then follow with “At the end, did the dynamic change suddenly or gradually?” You reply “it gradually got quieter, there was a **diminuendo**”. Remember, extra marks are given for using these Italian terms correctly.

Some more information:

- The exam is out of 150 marks and you have to get 100 to pass. 120 is a Merit while 130 is a Distinction.
- The exams are taken in a public centre which, for us, is usually the YMCA in Newport. The exams are held every term and you must enter (we do it for you online) at the start of the term in which you want to sit. We can put in a request for a certain week but it's not usually granted due to demand so if you're on holiday during term time – do tell us in advance!
- The lower grade examinations take 10-15 minutes only.
- There is an exam fee applicable which is paid to the exam board when we enter you (starting around £35 and going up by grade). Your accompanist will also charge you a fee for their time.
- The lower grades take 2 terms to prepare for; from grade 6 onwards we may insist you wait a year between exams in order to wait for your voice to develop sufficiently.
- From grade 6 upwards, the exams count towards UCAS point for University and College entry. We use the ABRSM syllabus as it is the most widely respected and valuable. This means that come grade 5, you will also need to sit a theory of music (written) exam to the same level – but we will help you with that closer to the time!!