



virtuosi school of music

Sacapuntas! – The Curriculum Update

ABRSM – November Exams *my personal experience...*

Firstly, well done to everyone who presented in the November rounds.

To follow up on a promise made to a pupil, I myself sat Grade 1 left-handed. I would like to give some feedback from my experience.

PREPARATION is key. This includes a good night's rest, breakfast, tuning and warm up on the day. There is a warm up room provided for warming up. One thing I tell my pupils is that music is not like a spelling or math test. If you are not well prepared you will be found out. We are training both the body and mind, and any insecurities will quickly surface and be exposed under pressure.

The second is regarding **IMAGINATION**. Before playing - be it a piece, scale or arpeggio - I ask students to prepare mentally the tempo and character before setting off. I did this until the very last e minor arpeggio in my exam, thinking 'I know this one & let's just get it out of the way'; of course I fluffed a note! You can see this most clearly when a classical pianist performs - they will take a moment to focus first before starting their performance, almost as if entering a trance.

Only then comes **DELIVERY**. Too often we start playing before thinking – performance is a completely distinct skill, which is why we hold regular concerts. Ideally, a pupil will have played in several student concerts before attempting exams. This completes the circle as preparing well includes performing often. Performing a piece you like and know well in concert is the best way to grow in confidence. My mantra for pupils preparing for a performance is exactly this: Preparation, Imagination, Delivery.

As a last word, when we get to the set elements I was pushed beyond the guidelines for Grade 1. Perhaps knowing I was a teacher this was done, however I have requested more information as the schedule was very hectic. I only briefly questioned the examiner during the actual exam before giving my answer. I can place myself on his side of the desk - he wants to see what you can do. Either that or he made a mistake with the melody on the repeat. The key to the Aural test is to listen, without preconceptions and respond to what is played, not to 'guess'. Only a wholistic preparation can prepare the pupil in this sense. Expect the unexpected, if you ace the A,B & C test, prepare to be pushed... I will seek clarification on this, as it could be very intimidating for young pupils to be presented with an element beyond the set guidelines for each grade.

End of term Concert - Saturday December 10, 2011

Our final student concert for 2011 was without doubt the highest standard seen yet. It was especially pleasing to see students improvising freely and adding idiomatic ornamentation to pieces. In addition the variety of instruments and styles on display – brass, strings, woodwind and vocalists, shows that the school is now maturing in its third year of operation.

Pupil's displayed personality in performance and true musical understanding. This is what sets us apart as a school... Appreciation is expressed to the teachers present for their continuing effort. We continue to collate our methodologies, and will launch an extended group class for all pupils wishing to enhance their knowledge further in 2012-13. The class will cover theory, aural & rhythm training, while touching on historical context and understanding tonality as a focus, to be led by senior teaching staff. This class is highly recommended for advancing pupils, and will be essential to achieving a wholistic understanding and mastery of music.

Staff Meeting 28/10 – 'A new wholistic methodology for instrumental teaching'

On Friday October 28th we held our first staff meeting of the year, sharing ideas with a view toward collating new instructional methods. For this meeting we focussed on gathering each teacher's expectations for a pupil's first year of learning: 'From Beginner to Intermediate' across each instrument.

This was done through individual reflection - sharing our teaching 'approach', as well as seeking solutions to common problems. Sharing ideas with teachers of other instruments I found personally to be both helpful and inspiring. We were able to immediately see how the strengths and weaknesses of each are directly related to their niche in the musical world – exploding a few myths in the process as well as confirming a few suspicions.

Our vision is to create as versatile and complete musician as possible. The focal point quickly turned to ways of introducing the concept of *Tonality* to young learners. Once drawn in, one element is reflected across the whole system - there are as many entry points as there are pupils. We also observed that many beginner's books omit key signatures, which is an annoyance. I suggest that for now we simply add them in ourselves whenever necessary. We should never presume to underestimate the cognitive abilities of younger learners.

Carlos Ema (Piano & Guitar) explained how he uses a 'Happy Song' to explore the Tonality, with his pupils learning to play the same song aurally on all 12 notes on the piano. Immediately his pupils are introduced to tonality and *transposition* in a simple, fun, and non-threatening way. This unit of teaching calls for a degree of humility and patience on the part of the teacher; we need to remember that making mistakes and finding solutions has been crucial to our own musical journey. Developing the musical ear alongside reading & technique is critical. Feelings, intuition and expression are innate, drawing them out and tying to music practice is the ultimate challenge for the teacher.

The question then turned to how we can apply this to other instruments. Kendra Borgen pointed out that her instruments transpose from the outset (Clarinet C sounds as Bb and Alto Sax Eb) for her there is simply no avoiding the issue. Her student's likewise explore the key system aurally, immediately across *all* keys.

The tuning and musical function of other instruments does not always allow a clear picture. From a personal viewpoint, the guitar is best designed as an accompanying instrument, and the concept of tonality best introduced through harmonic analysis (chords). Most young learners do not as yet have the strength in their hands for the more difficult chord shapes - some can, but are an exception to the rule. To date I have attacked this problem by initially introducing only three string chords. A capo is one historical transposing solution for guitar, however this does not inspire true understanding. The solution I am beginning to apply with my own students is to have them explore the key system at the keyboard whenever possible. The awareness gained is then transferrable. I would highly recommend the group theory class for this reason. From the coming academic year, Virtuosi will offer free Aural & Theory tuition to all students in conjunction with the birth of the Trinity College Examination Centre. Please register your interest to assist with our forward planning. To be continued...



Left : *Pondering the bigger picture;*
Kendra, Carlos, Ania & Trevor