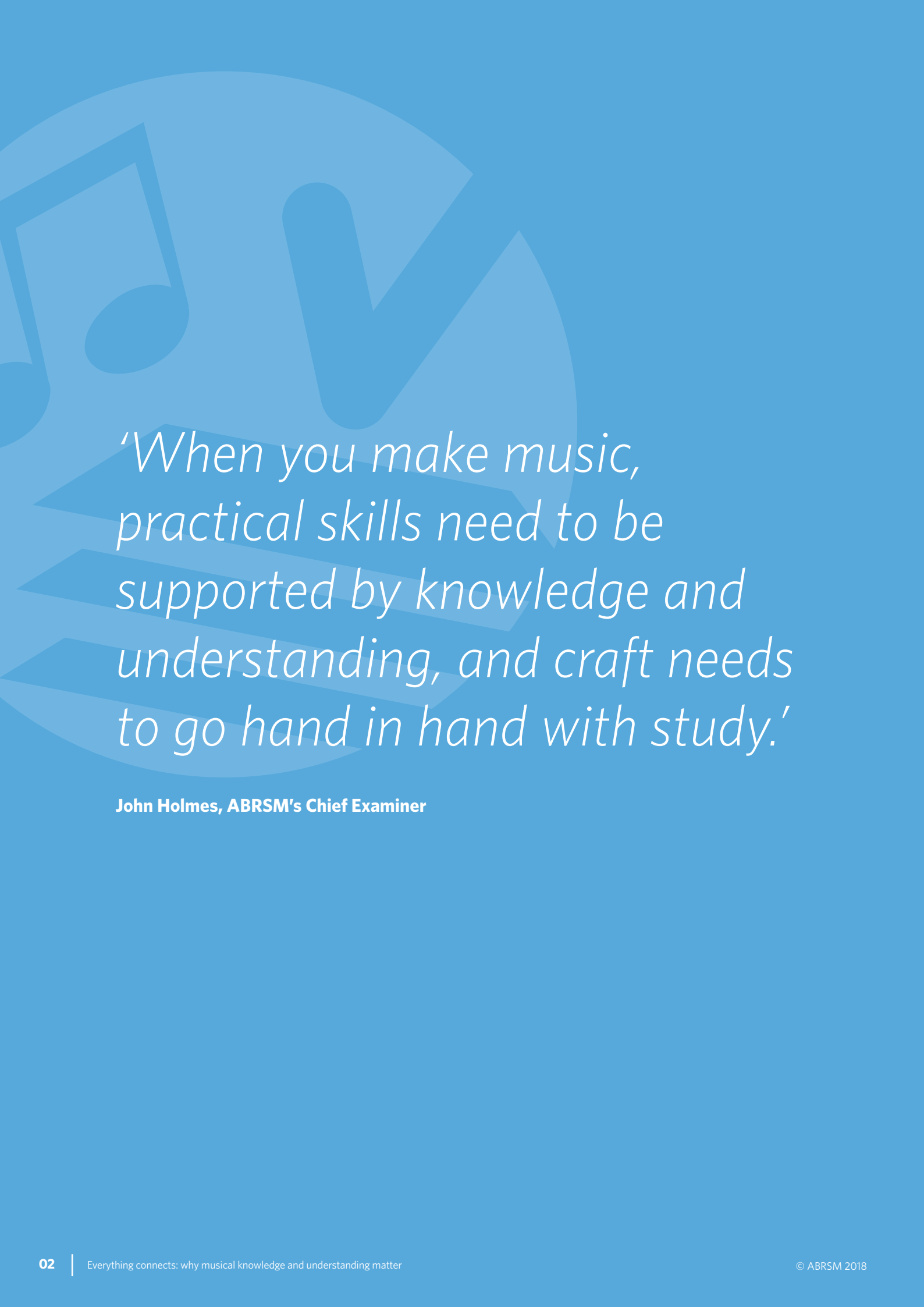




# Making Connections:

## The benefits of music learning

By John Holmes, ABRSM's Chief Examiner



*'When you make music,  
practical skills need to be  
supported by knowledge and  
understanding, and craft needs  
to go hand in hand with study.'*

**John Holmes, ABRSM's Chief Examiner**

# Making connections:

## The benefits of music learning

Learning to play a musical instrument or to sing brings extraordinary, lifelong benefits. Why? Because when you're working on your instrument or voice you're also working on yourself, as John Holmes explains.

It's one thing to be involved in music passively, by listening, but it's another thing entirely to make music by playing an instrument or by singing. Through active, progressive involvement in music making, the benefits really multiply.

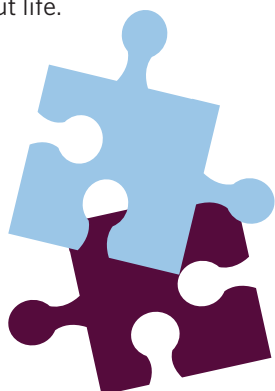
So, what happens when you are playing an instrument? You're doing a number of very different things, simultaneously. On the one hand you draw on a group of cognitive skills: thinking, controlling, analysing and reading. In musical terms this is about measuring pulse and rhythm, reading and recognising pitch, and controlling physical co-ordination and fine motor skills. On the other hand, you call on more instinctive and emotional abilities relating to imagination, perception, creative understanding and musical meaning.

Rarely is such a wide range of skills and abilities present in one activity, but when you play an instrument, including your singing voice, they are all brought together at the same time. The amazing thing about making music – the unique lifelong benefit – is that it forges vital connections between all these different types of skill and activity. Creating these connections is especially valuable during the childhood and teenage years of growth, education and personal development. The benefits will then be there whatever a young person's ambitions are – musical or otherwise.

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### DEVELOPING PHYSICAL CO-ORDINATION AND FINE MOTOR CONTROL

Depending on the instrument, musicians might need delicate finger movements or refined breath control or unusual degrees of co-ordination, perhaps between feet, hands, eyes and breath. All these call for highly developed motor control. In addition, when playing from notation, musicians use a unique kind of brain-to-body co-ordination, which allows them to transform notes on the page into music. These are valuable skills, which are transferable to many other areas of activity, throughout life.



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### INTEGRATING MENTAL AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

When you play an instrument you combine many different kinds of mental activity with a physical activity; music making combines doing with thinking, knowing and understanding.

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### DEMONSTRATING KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

One special aspect of music making is the way a musician has to show their understanding through physical actions. In a performance, musicians are drawing on their inner knowledge and understanding, and using this to inform their realisation of the music and focus their musical communication.

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### BEING EXPRESSIVE

Making music, rather than just listening to it, provides opportunities for outward expression of feelings and emotions. Having this outlet can be important for everyone, but can become particularly valuable for those who feel uneasy about expressing themselves in other ways. This might be children, teenagers, those with specific needs, or anyone for whom expression and communication do not come easily.

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### USING CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

Making music fosters creativity and imagination and provides ways to turn creative ideas into reality. Young people can draw upon these experiences as tools for the rest of their life, whatever they go on to do.

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## BUILDING SELF-BELIEF AND CONFIDENCE

Learning how to give a musical performance has a positive effect on personal confidence. Many of the skills you need when playing or singing to others are the same ones you use when presenting yourself and communicating in other situations, such as school plays, interviews, discussions and meetings, or speaking in public. Self-belief, and the inner confidence this can bring, is a fundamental benefit of making progress on a musical instrument.

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## NURTURING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

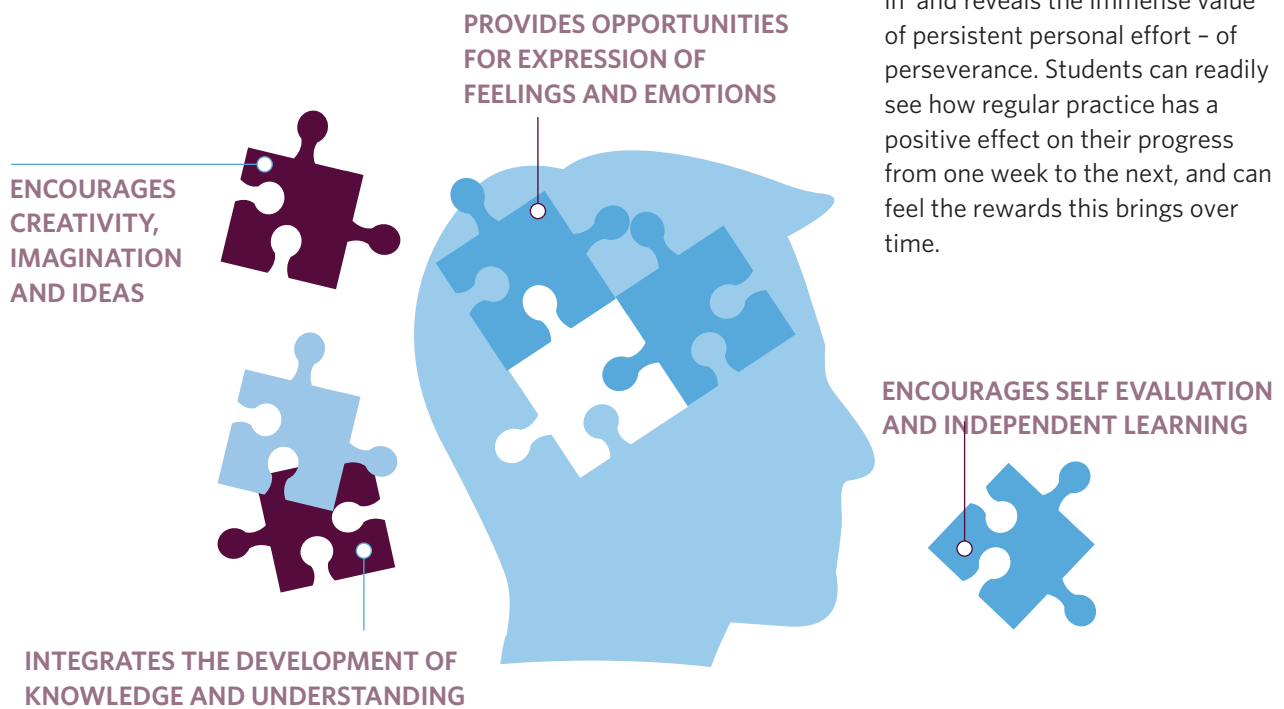
An essential part of being a musician, especially when making music with others, is the ability to listen, to assess situations and respond, and to be sensitive to what other people are doing. So, as students develop their musical and ensemble skills, they are also building skills in perception, personal awareness and emotional intelligence.

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## LEARNING TO LEARN

By working at playing or singing, you find out important things about learning itself – especially independent learning. Through regular lessons and practice, students gain skills in reflection and self-evaluation. They discover how to work independently and, eventually, how to take control of their own learning and progress.

The relationship between practising, progress and achievement is a powerful one. It helps students to understand the universal equation that ‘you get back what you put in’ and reveals the immense value of persistent personal effort – of perseverance. Students can readily see how regular practice has a positive effect on their progress from one week to the next, and can feel the rewards this brings over time.



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## The role of progression

The key to unlocking these benefits is progression. Simply taking part in musical activity – just ‘having a go’ – is perfectly worthwhile, but it does not have the same powerful effects. There are many activities which support and inspire musical progression. These could be curriculum music lessons at school as well as instrumental tuition; listening to music and attending live performances; improvising or composing; or being part of a choir, group, band or orchestra.

Progression is also more likely if learning follows well-structured steps, supported by carefully graded repertoire and recognised through helpful, reliable assessments. This is something which ABRSM’s graded music exams can provide, by connecting progress, achievement, assessment and motivation into a virtuous circle.

Together, a range of musical activities combine to form an informal ‘curriculum’. They create a rich and varied diet whereby students can learn in an enjoyable, progressive and sustainable way, and gain valuable inter-related skills – not just for music making, but for life.

# Everything connects:

## Why musical knowledge and understanding matter

Most people acknowledge that music is a language, and sometimes it can be helpful to think of music in this way. When we have a good knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of language – including grammar, vocabulary and meaning – this increases our ability to communicate effectively.

We can be clearer, more articulate and more expressive in what we write or say. Similarly, in order to communicate musically with clarity, accuracy, meaning and expression, our playing and singing needs to be underpinned by knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of music. This is often- and perhaps unhelpfully- called music 'Theory'.

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### Practical benefits

On the surface, it may seem that we can do something perfectly well – in the physical sense – without any particular knowledge or understanding of what we are doing, or how we are doing it. To some extent, this is entirely possible. However, when you play an instrument or sing, there are very practical advantages to having a good knowledge and understanding of music and how it works. It makes a big difference to how well we play or sing, and how effectively we perform.

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### Craft supported by study

Making music is similar to many other practical, skill-based activities, in the sense that the physical craft needs to be supported by theoretical study. It's one thing to follow a recipe and cook a meal, but with an understanding of cooking temperatures, the effect of one ingredient on another, and the impact of food combinations and menu construction, you can take your cooking skills to another level.

Taking another example, to succeed as a footballer you need to know the rules, understand tactics and be able to 'read' the game, adapting and responding as it unfolds. Without this, your performance on the pitch would be significantly undermined, no matter how good your skills may be.

In each of these examples, it's all about the connection between practical skill and mental awareness, and in successful musical performance these two dimensions need to be interacting constantly with one another.

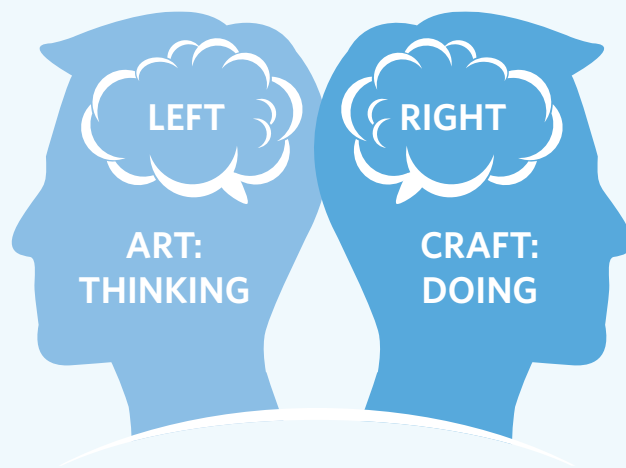
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### Making music to the best of our ability

Nobody takes up an instrument in order to learn about sharps and flats or to understand time signatures, but this is just the kind of knowledge and understanding we really need if we are going to make music to the best of our ability. For instance, if we understand what a cadence is and what function it has, then it's much easier to bring this aspect of musical punctuation effectively to life in our playing.

Similarly, if we understand the stylistic features of the music we are performing, it becomes much easier to highlight these in our singing, and convey them effectively to the listener.

At a more basic level, awareness of how music works can also help us avoid a range of errors. These could be inadvertent wrong notes, rhythmic inconsistencies or unrealised detail, perhaps involving important repeats or performance markings such as pauses, dynamics or tempo changes.



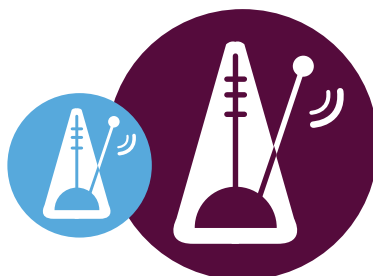
## Thinking about the marking criteria

As ABRSM examiners, we assess performance using marking criteria which focus on pitch, time, tone, shape and performance. There are aspects of each of these fundamental ingredients of music-making which are underpinned by musical knowledge and understanding, to the point where the level of this knowledge and understanding is actually audible.



### PITCH

Pitch involves aspects of key and tonality, scale and arpeggio patterns, chords and cadences, clefs, intervals and transposition. Understanding and knowing about scale and arpeggio patterns and keys means that students become familiar with many ingredients of music, which can help to make their playing or singing more reliable and accurate. For example, if a student is unaware that an accidental affects the rest of the bar, there can easily be wrong notes, and- of course- good intonation is inextricably linked to awareness and understanding of pitch.



### TIME

As teachers, we are often encouraging students to feel a sense of pulse or to focus on the sense of rhythm in their music making. Building a student's knowledge and understanding in relation to time signatures, note values, rests and metrical groupings is central to being able to play in time.

For example, if students understand how compound time works, then not only will they be able to get the note values right, but they'll also be able to achieve the right pattern of emphases. Similarly, if the word 'swing' appears at the top of a piece, it's essential that a student knows and understands what that means, because this instruction has a fundamental impact on the rhythmic feel of the music.

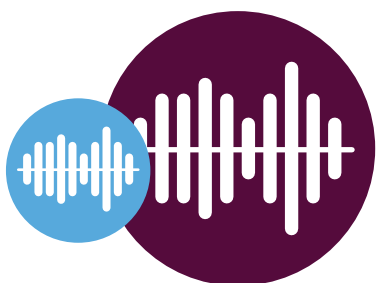
When someone plays with good knowledge, understanding and awareness of this aspect of time, it has a very audible effect on their interpretation of the music. Unfortunately, the reverse can also apply; without this important knowledge, appropriate rhythmic character will be lost.



### TONE

It may seem less obvious that aspects of tone can be affected by knowing or not knowing your music theory, but musical terms such as cantabile or sotto voce give quite specific guidance about the kind of sound you need to make. Similarly, understanding how a solo fits within the overall musical texture, or knowing about the music's historical or stylistic soundworld can all contribute significantly to the performer's effective use and control of tone.





## SHAPE

When it comes to musical shaping, students need to know about phrase marks, dynamics, articulation, form and structure if they are to convey a convincing sense of musical flow and direction in their playing or singing. As performers, we need to understand how bars combine into phrases, how phrases combine into sections, and then how sections combine into an overall musical structure. Through knowing about and understanding this, we can give music appropriate poise and punctuation, and communicate a sense of its overall architecture through our playing or singing.



## PERFORMANCE

The final ingredient which we assess in an ABRSM exam is performance. This is all about a candidate's relationship with their instrument or voice, and with the music's meaning and message. It's also about the connection between performer and listener – in this case the candidate and the examiner – through live musical communication.

Perhaps surprisingly, here too a student's understanding of how music works, as well as its history and context, can be heard clearly through their performance. Realisation of expression marks, performance directions, character and mood, style and idiom – these are all important aspects of an effective performance, which rely on underlying musical knowledge and understanding. If we are to make a piece by Bach sound different from a piece by Bartók, we need to understand what it is that makes their music so distinctive.



The overriding thought in all of this is that everything in music connects. When we make music, practical control and mental awareness have to go hand-in-hand; doing and thinking need to happen together. In this way, the craft and the study of music form a powerful partnership which involves not only instrumental skills, but also musical knowledge and understanding.

# Making connections:

## Assessment and progression

As teachers, we know that assessment is an essential part of learning and progression, guiding students from one stage to the next via clear signposts. The two distinct types of assessment – formative and summative – are very different from each other but also complementary. Both are equally valid and have important roles to play in the learning process.

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### Formative and summative assessment

Formative assessment is embedded in the day-to-day process of teaching and learning, and happens over time. It includes the immediate spoken feedback that teachers give to students during lessons, and often focuses on the technical aspects of learning to play or sing. This kind of assessment takes place in the context of a long-term teacher/learner relationship, and draws on the knowledge and understanding which this provides. It is applicable in all settings, including one-to-one and group lessons, as well as classroom teaching.

Summative assessment, on the other hand, provides a snapshot summary of achievement, based on one moment in time. ABRSM exams come into this category. Our examiners focus entirely on what happens in the exam room on the day, rather than on any aspects beyond the exam room, such as preparation or aspects of development and promise. Examiners have no background information about candidates, and assess only what they hear in the exam, taking into account the full range of elements involved in musical playing.

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### What makes an effective assessment?

For any assessment to have a positive impact on progression it needs to be the right kind of assessment. An effective assessment needs to measure the right things, and using marking criteria based on the essential ingredients of music-making ensures that this happens. The ABRSM marking criteria connect with the fundamental elements of musical playing and singing – pitch, time, tone, shape and performance – elements that existed long before ABRSM. As a consequence of this, you can apply our marking criteria to all instruments and singing, and across all grades; they are universal criteria for the assessment of music-making.

An effective assessment also needs to measure accurately. Our marking criteria clearly show the difference between the various attainment levels. This makes it straightforward for teachers to assess their students, and for students to assess themselves. It also ensures that examiners are consistent in their marking.

Finally, if it is to motivate learners, assessment needs also to be meaningful. It needs to show insight and give signposts towards the next stage of learning. So our criteria encourage examiners to think across the full range of musical elements involved, and indicate the balance between what went well and what went not so well. Music exists in real time, so any valid assessment has to weigh up strengths and weaknesses simultaneously, as the music unfolds. This is very much the ABRSM model of assessment. Examiners mark up or down from the pass mark, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses they hear during the exam, in order to arrive at the mark.



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## Becoming an independent learner

It's tempting to see the role of progression as something linear, like the grades: 1, then 2, then 3. However, a more significant measure of progress is perhaps the journey from dependence to independence; from students relying on their teacher to have responsibility for their learning, to students taking on that responsibility themselves. Real progression is about acquiring the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to keep progression going independently. To do this students need to become 'independent learners'.

An essential part of becoming an independent learner is being able to self-assess: to recognise which aspects of your own playing or singing could be better, and the necessary tools available to improve them.

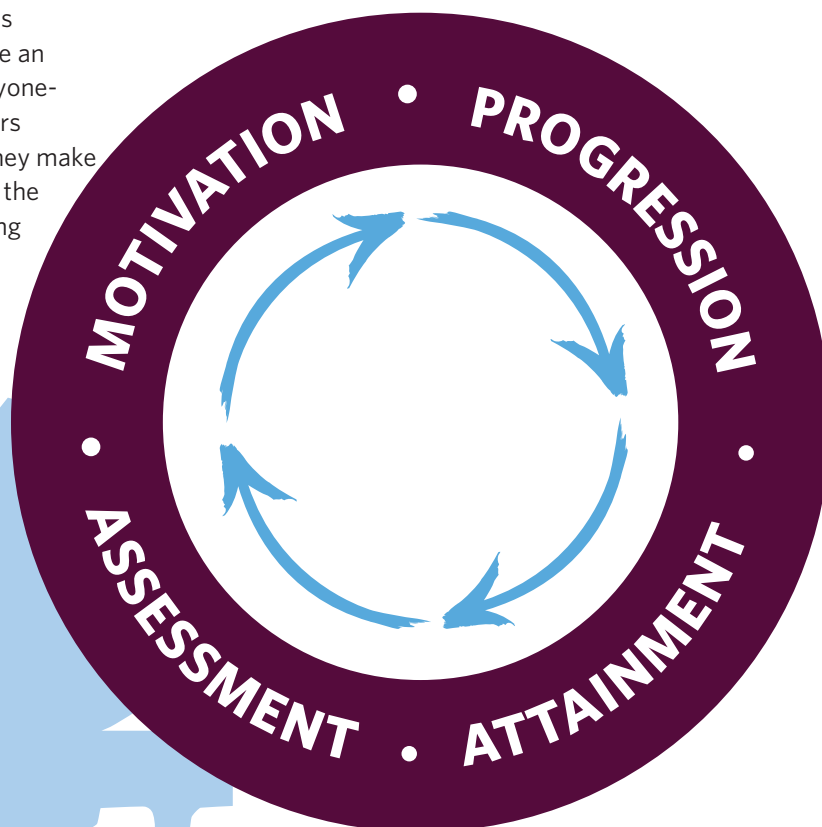
ABRSM's marking criteria for graded exams are designed to help with this. They provide an assessment 'guide' that can be used by anyone - not just examiners - but candidates, teachers and everyone else involved in the exam. They make it easy to identify and assess the quality of the various elements involved in musical playing or singing, and the student's degree of control over those elements.

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## A virtuous circle

There's a virtuous circle linking progression and assessment, via attainment and motivation. First comes progression - a learner gets better at something to the point where there's a sense of attainment. This attainment is formally recognised and affirmed through an effective summative assessment, which in turn goes on to provide motivation, guidance and inspiration for the next stage of learning and progression... and so the circle continues.

This relationship between assessment and progression is an extremely valuable one. ABRSM's aim is for our exams (and the marking criteria upon which they are based) to sustain, encourage, support and inspire musical learning and progression more effectively than ever before.





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