

AMEB Exams Information Sheet

What are AMEB Exams?

The Australian Music Examination Board (AMEB) is an internationally recognized system of music examinations that covers a wide range of instruments and music theory. The Board's Head Office is located in Melbourne, and each state has its own local office responsible for exam scheduling. In South Australia the University of Adelaide administers the AMEB, and 2012 sees the 125th anniversary of music exams in this state.

Who are the examiners?

Examiners are chosen for their highly developed musical skills, along with their extensive experience of teaching their chosen instrument. There is a panel of approximately one hundred examiners that may be called upon, and candidates will almost always be examined by a specialist examiner, i.e., violin students will be examined by a violinist, flute students will be examined by a flautist, etc. Examiners have to undergo regular professional development seminars, and their reports are randomly selected for scrutiny by Federal office to ensure standards are being maintained nationwide.

How many grades are there?

Most instruments begin at Preliminary Grade and progress through to eighth grade. Keyboard syllabuses have a Certificate of Completion level after eighth grade. Once the grades have been completed, students have the option to continue their studies by working towards the Associate (A.Mus.A.), and Licentiate (L.Mus.A) Diplomas. These diplomas require a very high standard of performance and are roughly equivalent to first year university and third year university respectively.

Do I have to do exams?

No! There is absolutely no requirement for students to progress through exams. Beethoven, Mozart or Chopin never did any, nor did most of the top rock stars, and it didn't seem to have a detrimental effect on their careers. Exams are not a pre-requisite for being able to teach music, nor are they a pre-requisite for entry into specialist music schools or even tertiary institutions; (if you read the fine print it always says "*Approximately AMEB Grade X or equivalent...*") However, exams do provide a series of goals and challenges that students can work towards, and the exam report is tangible independent feedback on how the student is progressing.

What do exams consist of?

Students are required to perform technical work, three or four set pieces, aural tests, sight reading, and answer general knowledge questions about the pieces they've presented. The examiner will comment about each section and then match the performance to a set of assessment criteria in order to arrive at a grading decision. Gradings are A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, and D (Fail). The examiner's decision is final and unless they committed a breach of the regulations, no amount of whining and complaining will change it. Students working towards exams will need to learn to hone their playing to a far greater degree of detail than would otherwise be acceptable if they're going to score well against the assessment criteria. A period of at least four months for the early grades (and often a lot longer for the higher grades) is required for all areas of the syllabus to be covered adequately.

Why are there three Piano syllabuses to choose from?

Piano is the most popular instrument by a country mile. The Board recognizes that not everybody wants to play classical music, and so they've introduced Piano for Leisure and Contemporary Popular Music (CPM) syllabuses. All syllabuses are equal in standing; in other words, Piano for Leisure is no easier than the Classical syllabus, and CPM is not a watered down version of either. Each syllabus examines a different set of skills and provides challenges in different areas.

If I get an 'A+' or an 'A', can I skip the next grade?

Do you skip a year at school just because you got straight As on your report? It is extremely inadvisable to skip grades, for the simple reason that often there is a huge jump in expectations from one grade to the next. By all means, take the time to do the work for the following exam, but completing 1st grade and then skipping straight to 3rd grade will usually end in tears. Believe me, examiners take no pleasure from failing candidates, but if it is clear in the exam that you're not meeting the syllabus expectations, there can really only be one outcome. Exams were never intended to be used as a means to themselves; they are not a complete curriculum and should be used only as an indicator of the student's present playing ability.

I can already play a 5th Grade piece. Can I do that exam?

There is an old European cliché that says, "One swallow doesn't make a summer." (It refers to a migratory bird that returns to Europe every May and heralds the return of warmer weather). Just because you can play one piece from a particular grade book doesn't mean you've reached the level of that exam. As mentioned earlier, there's all the technical work and peripheral things that need to be learnt before each grade can be ticked off. Students should really be aiming to learn at least 6 pieces from their grade books if they're going to do justice to the exam.

Can I count exams towards my schoolwork?

This is from the state AMEB website:

The AMEB has been listed as one of the community organisations whose qualifications are awarded credits towards secondary school students' SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education).

The SACE Board of SA now recognizes the qualifications of a number of organisations such as the AMEB, Royal Life Saving and Scouts Australia in the "free choice" section of the SACE.

Grade 5 AMEB music is now equal to 10 credits for Stage 1 SACE (Year 11) and the practical component only of grades 6, 7 and 8 are also equal to 1 unit each for Stage 2 (Year 12). The system will be retrospective to 2003.

These units DO NOT count towards the student's Tertiary Entrance Ranking (TER), and indeed this recognition may well change when the new National Schools Curriculum comes into effect.

So why do exams at all?

Personal gratification, musical development, goal setting, personal development, self-esteem, personal challenge, cultural improvement, sense of progress, internationally recognized qualifications in music, personal growth, ability to perform under pressure, work ethic. The list goes on.

At Forte School of Music we'd like to think we're instilling in our students all the above and more. We aim to set learning goals so that students (and parents) can see where the musical path is heading. Students do not have to be at a certain point along the path by a certain time. Exams are a tangible way to measure progress and musical development, but the overriding factor must always be a continuing enjoyment of playing music and exploring the vast array of styles and genres. We believe exams are important, but they're not a means to themselves. The world is full of people who progressed through music exams and who can't play anything other than exam pieces; we on the other hand aim to teach students to be musicians, to play for their own and other's enjoyment, and to understand that music was never meant to be assessed in an exam situation.

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