



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, perhaps unhelpfully, called music theory.

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 should be entirely possible. However, when you play an instrument or sing, there are very practical benefits 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.

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.

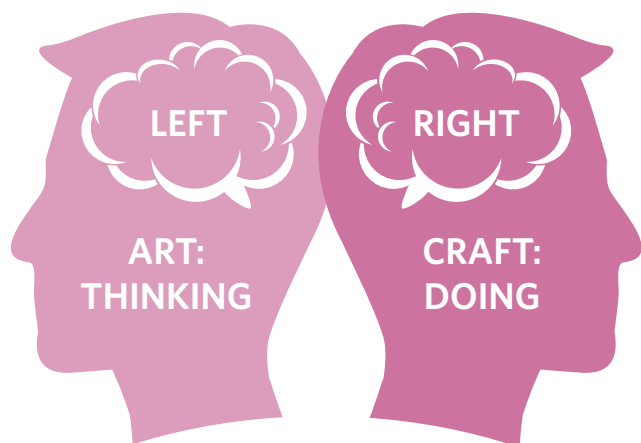
In each of these examples, it's all about the connection between practical skill and mental awareness, and in successful musical performance these two elements need to be interacting constantly with one another.

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 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.



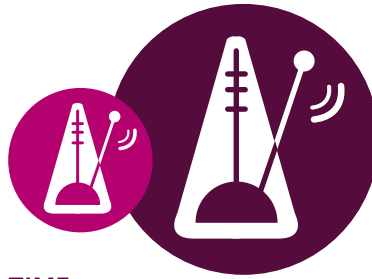
THINKING ABOUT THE MARKING CRITERIA

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.

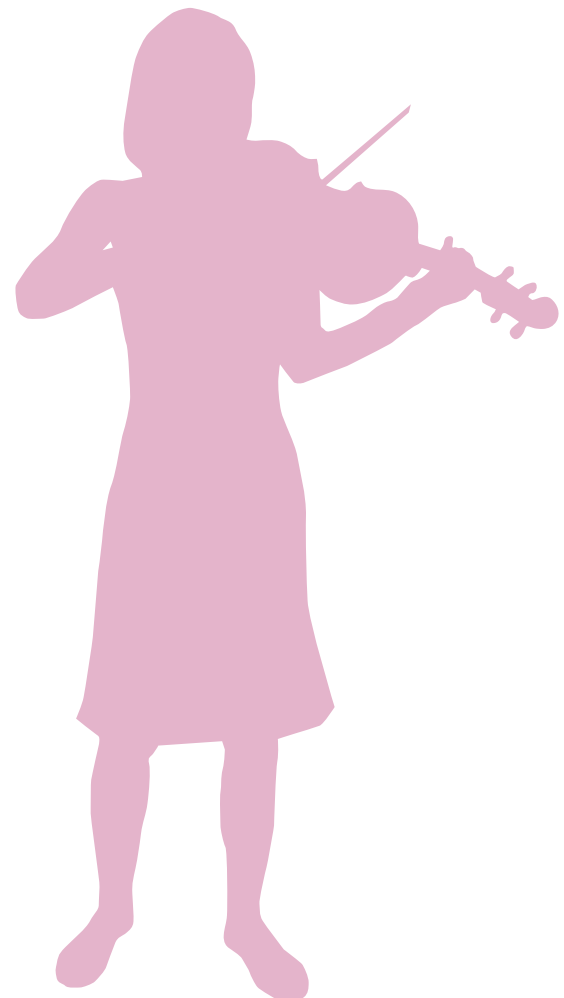
For example, if students understand how compound time works, then not only will they be able to get the note values right, but they'll also be able to achieve the right pattern of emphases. Similarly, if the word 'swing' appears at the top of a piece, it's essential that a student knows and understands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

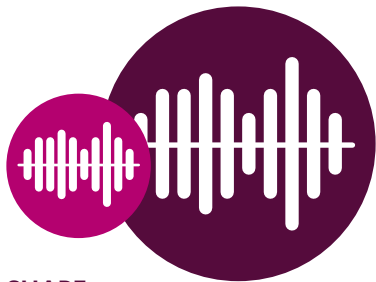
When someone plays with good knowledge, understanding and awareness of this aspect of time, it has a very audible effect on their interpretation of the music. Unfortunately, the reverse can also apply; without this important knowledge, rhythmic character will be lost.



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.

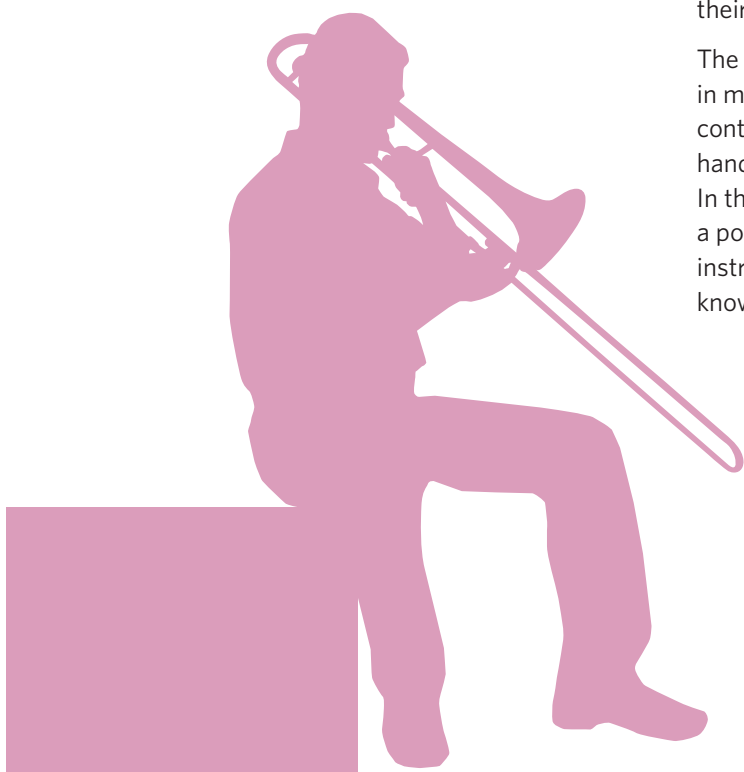


PERFORMANCE

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 or vocal skills, but also musical knowledge and understanding.



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