

# Music, dyslexia and access arrangements

Sally Daunt



## Dyslexia, Music and exams

Learning to play an instrument or to sing presents particular challenges for people with dyslexia.

Sally Daunt, from the British Dyslexia Association, summarises the issues involved and suggests strategies for supporting students.

Why should we, as music teachers, parents, carers, candidates or examiners be bothered about dyslexia? Well, it is generally accepted that dyslexia affects 10% of the population and it can affect musical activity.

### What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is one of a number of Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) and may overlap with others: dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit (and hyperactivity) disorder and autistic spectrum disorders.

The British Dyslexia Association describes it as 'a combination of abilities and difficulties that affect the learning process'. It can affect reading, spelling, writing and music – both theory and practical. It's lifelong, can vary in

severity, is independent of intelligence and is hereditary. Helpful strategies can certainly be developed and, importantly, dyslexic individuals may have particular strengths in areas such as design, problem solving (think of Albert Einstein) and creative skills (think of Nigel Kennedy or Cher).

### How do I recognise dyslexia?

One of the key indicators of dyslexia is a mismatch between someone's perceived intellectual ability and the way that person works day to day.

Tasks may take a surprisingly long time and there may be problems with the speed of processing information, short-term memory, organisation, spoken language and motor skills. There can also be problems with

auditory and/or visual perception, including 'visual stress' – a distortion of text or musical notation.

Many activities require much extra effort for dyslexic individuals, leading to exhaustion and stress: look out for this. Dyslexic people may also have low self-esteem, so encouragement and patience are key.

There are short tests designed to flag up the probability of dyslexic difficulties (not a diagnosis) as well as full diagnostic assessments (see the BDA website for information). For school-age pupils, speak to the school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo).



### How does dyslexia affect music learning?

Commonly reported difficulties with music include reading notation, especially at sight, and learning new music quickly.

Remembering interval names and the number of sharps or flats in a key signature, and recognising cadences can all cause problems. Taking information from written music, especially fingerings, and applying them to the instrument can be difficult. Aural work is often challenging.

### How can you support a pupil with dyslexia?

All strategies need to be individualised. Pupils, however young, know best what helps them, so ask!

### Help with visual stress

Visual stress can be helped with individually chosen tinted paper, coloured overlays and/or enlargement, including Modified Stave Notation – Google that!

Specialist tinted glasses and/or use of technology that modifies the format of music can be useful (find out more from the BDA).

Remember, it is legal to photocopy music to make it easier for someone who 'has a cognitive impairment such as dyslexia' to read, as long as the original is taken into the exam or performance.

### Teaching strategies

It may be that written music isn't always necessary and, as an alternative, improvisation and memorisation can both be fulfilling.

**All strategies need to be individualised. Pupils, however young, know best what helps them, so ask ... good strategies for dyslexic pupils are usually really good general teaching strategies too!**

Multi-sensory approaches are also helpful. For example, work on intervals by making shapes in the air or steps on the ground, reinforce metre through movement, and physically demonstrate terms such as 'high/low' and 'right/left'. Using colour can be useful, with pupils choosing preferences and annotating music themselves.

For short-term memory problems, try chunking or breaking down. Aural can be treated in this way, gradually building up to longer phrases. Generally, be sure of one point or skill before moving on. Use over-learning or revision with plenty of time to firm up skills.

Both Dalcroze and Kodály are worth exploring for their dyslexia-friendly approaches. Indeed, good strategies for dyslexic pupils are usually really good general teaching strategies too!

### Support with organisation

Organisation can be difficult for some dyslexic people. Do you know a student who constantly turns up for lessons without the right music or at the wrong time or place? That person may be dyslexic. 'To do' lists can be attached to music cases – less likely to get lost! Send texts/emails and encourage students to put reminders on their phones. Have a website with useful information and perhaps videos with 'how to practise' demonstrations. Be imaginative!

### Taking an exam

Many aspects of dyslexia can affect exams. Accessing sight-reading and written material can be difficult for SpLD candidates.





Short-term memory problems can affect aural tests. Verbal instructions can also be difficult. Think about the following: 'Please play B ... harmonic ... minor ... a third apart ... staccato'. A dyslexic candidate may well have forgotten the key by the end of such a sentence.

### Making adjustments

ABRSM and other exam boards offer 'reasonable adjustments' for candidates with a large range of disabilities. They don't make the exam easier, but do create a level playing field. Remember, dyslexia is a 'disability' and it is illegal to discriminate against disabled people.

To benefit from these adjustments, candidates must have written proof of their dyslexia - you can contact the BDA or ABRSM if you need help here. You also need to include the correct information when making an exam entry. ABRSM's Access Co-ordinator can explain the range of possible adjustments, which include extra time and modification of written papers and sight-reading. Depending on the adjustment, you may need to send examples of the type of paper/print needed to ABRSM.

### Elements of the exam

In the aural tests that include listening to a musical example or phrase, candidates may be able to ask for the question to be repeated. Also, if a candidate answers and it seems that they have misunderstood the question, the examiner may restate the question and ask them to answer again.

Additional attempts at the scales may be possible and candidates may be able to use a scale book for reference - or the unaccompanied traditional song words, for singers.

There may also be options to annotate sight-reading tests during preparation, using colour if that helps, and to make notes of verbal instructions during the exam.

Do remember, you will need prior approval from ABRSM for these options, so they can provide special copies and meet any other requests. Adjustments cannot be approved on the day of the exam by the examiner.

### Other options

Finally, don't forget ABRSM's Performance Assessment, which provides another option and may be more appropriate for some musicians with dyslexia. ■

*Sally Daunt is Chair of the British Dyslexia Association music committee and a support tutor at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts.*

### Where to find out more

#### ABRSM

For full details of our provision for candidates with dyslexia, dyspraxia and other learning difficulties:  
[www.abrsm.org/specificneeds](http://www.abrsm.org/specificneeds)

#### British Dyslexia Association

Search for music at  
[www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk)  
 Or email the BDA Music team for more information: [bdamusicdyslexia@gmail.com](mailto:bdamusicdyslexia@gmail.com)

#### Incorporated Society of Musicians

The ISM has a free webinar on music and dyslexia:  
[www.ism.org/professional-development/webinars](http://www.ism.org/professional-development/webinars)

#### Music Publishers Association

For information about photocopying, see page 11 of the MPA's Code of Fair Practice:  
[www.mpaonline.org.uk/content/code-fair-practice](http://www.mpaonline.org.uk/content/code-fair-practice)