

## **MUSIC THEORY** *(Subject Code: 99)*

Developing literacy with the tonal language forms a key part of a rounded education for performers, composers and listeners of all kinds. An understanding of how written symbols relate to the elements of music, and having the skills to interpret and translate them into sounds, empowers us to communicate and experience music in a meaningful way. Without knowledge of notation it is impossible for classical musicians to access their repertoire with ease or to rehearse together; and this repertoire could not be heard at all had composers not been able to write it down. So, music theory is a very practical subject that is completely entwined with performance and composition.

ABRSM's Music Theory exams give students opportunities to acquire:

- a knowledge of the notation of western music, including the signs and terminology commonly employed
- an understanding of fundamental musical elements such as intervals, keys, scales and chords
- skill in constructing balanced rhythmic patterns or completing given melodic or harmonic structures
- an ability to apply theoretical knowledge and understanding to score analysis

Candidates are assessed on their ability to identify, use and manipulate conventional musical symbols, to complete extracts and to answer questions relating to the elements of music according to the grade-by-grade parameters detailed on the following pages.

### **Grade 5 as a prerequisite**

A longstanding ABRSM benchmark is that a pass at Grade 5 or above in Music Theory must be obtained before candidates can enter for Grades 6, 7 or 8 Practical exams. We believe that a thorough understanding of the elements of music is essential for a full and satisfying performance at these higher grades. (Grade 5 or above in Practical Musicianship or any solo Jazz subject also fulfils this prerequisite.)

### **Marking scheme**

Theory exams are marked out of a total of 100, with 66 marks required for a Pass, 80 for a Merit and 90 for a Distinction. The marking criteria for Theory exams are available at [www.abrsm.org/theorymarkingcriteria](http://www.abrsm.org/theorymarkingcriteria).

### **Past papers**

Copies of the question papers set in ABRSM's Theory exams for each of the preceding five years are available for purchase from music retailers and from [www.abrsm.org/shop](http://www.abrsm.org/shop). Model answers for papers for the same period are also available.

## Theory GRADE 1

- 1 Note values of semibreve, minim, crotchet, quaver and semiquaver, and their equivalent rests (candidates may use the terms 'whole note', 'half note', etc.). Tied notes. Single-dotted notes and rests.
- 2 Simple time signatures of  $\frac{2}{4}$   $\frac{3}{4}$   $\frac{4}{4}$ ; bar-lines and the grouping of the notes listed above within these times. Composition of a two-bar rhythm in answer to a given rhythm starting on the first beat of a bar.
- 3 The staff. Treble (G) and bass (F) clefs. Names of notes on the staff, including middle C in both clefs. Sharp, flat and natural signs, and their cancellation.
- 4 Construction of the major scale, including the position of the tones and semitones. Scales and key signatures of the major keys of C, G, D and F in both clefs, with their tonic triads (root position), degrees (number only), and intervals above the tonic (by number only).
- 5 Some frequently used terms and signs concerning tempo, dynamics, performance directions and articulation marks. Simple questions will be asked about a melody written in either treble or bass clef.

## Theory GRADE 2

As in Grade 1, with the addition of:

- 1 Simple time signatures of  $\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{3}{2}$   $\frac{4}{2}$   $\frac{3}{8}$  and the grouping of notes and rests within these times. Triplets, and triplet note groups with rests. Questions will include the composition of simple four-bar rhythms starting on the first beat of the bar and using a given opening.
- 2 Extension of the staff to include two ledger lines below and above each staff.
- 3 Construction of the minor scale (harmonic *or* melodic at candidate's choice, but candidates will be expected to know which form they are using). Scales and key signatures of the major keys of A, B $\flat$  and E $\flat$ , and the minor keys of A, E and D, with their tonic triads (root position), degrees (number only), and intervals above the tonic (by number only).
- 4 More terms and signs in common use.

## Theory GRADE 3

As in preceding grades, with the addition of:

- 1 Compound time signatures of  $\frac{6}{8}$   $\frac{9}{8}$   $\frac{12}{8}$  and the grouping of notes and rests within these times. The demisemiquaver (32nd note) and its equivalent rest. Questions will include the composition of a simple four-bar rhythm which may start on an upbeat.
- 2 Extension of the staff beyond two ledger lines. The transposition of a simple melody from the treble clef to the bass clef, or vice versa, at the octave.
- 3 Scales and key signatures of all major and minor keys up to and including four sharps and flats, including both harmonic and melodic forms of minor scales, with their tonic triads (root position), degrees (number only), and intervals above the tonic (number and type).
- 4 More terms and signs. The simple questions about a melody may include one on its phrase structure.

## Theory GRADE 4

As in preceding grades, with the addition of:

- 1 All simple and compound duple, triple and quadruple time signatures, and the grouping of notes and rests within these times. The breve and its equivalent rest. Double-dotted notes and rests. Duplets. Questions will include the composition of a four-bar rhythm *or* (at candidate's choice) the composition of a rhythm to given words.
- 2 Alto clef (C clef centred on 3rd line). The identification of notes in the alto clef in any of the keys set for this grade (see below), and the transcription at the same pitch of a simple melody from the treble or the bass clef to the alto clef, and vice versa. Double sharp and double flat signs, and their cancellation. Enharmonic equivalents.
- 3 Scales and key signatures of all major and minor keys up to and including five sharps and flats, with both forms of minor scales. Technical names for the notes of the diatonic scale (tonic, supertonic, etc.). Construction of the chromatic scale. All intervals, not exceeding an octave, between any two diatonic notes in any of the keys set for this grade.
- 4 The identification and writing of triads (root position) on the tonic, subdominant and dominant notes in any of the keys set for this grade. The recognition of  $\frac{5}{3}$  (root position) chords on the tonic, subdominant and dominant notes in any of the keys set for this grade (the harmonic form of the scale will be used in minor keys).
- 5 More terms and signs, including the recognition and naming (but not writing out) of the trill, turn, upper and lower mordent, acciaccatura and appoggiatura. Questions about a passage of music will include simple related questions about standard orchestral instruments.

## Theory GRADE 5

As in preceding grades, with the addition of:

- 1 Irregular time signatures of  $\frac{5}{4}$   $\frac{7}{4}$   $\frac{5}{8}$   $\frac{7}{8}$  and the grouping of notes and rests within these times. Irregular divisions of simple time values.
- 2 Tenor clef (C clef centred on 4th line). The identification of notes in the four clefs in any of the keys set for this grade (see below), and the transposition at the octave of a simple melody from any clef to another. The writing at concert pitch of a melody notated for an instrument in B $\flat$ , A or F, and vice versa (the interval of transposition up or down will be given). The writing in open score, using treble and bass clefs, of a passage for SATB written on two staves, and vice versa.
- 3 Scales and key signatures of all major and minor keys up to and including six sharps and flats. All simple and compound intervals from any note.
- 4 The identification of the  $\frac{5}{3}$   $\frac{6}{3}$  and  $\frac{6}{4}$  forms of the tonic, supertonic, subdominant and dominant chords in any of the keys set for this grade. The identification of the progression  $\frac{6}{4}$   $\frac{5}{3}$  (Ic-V) on the dominant note in any of the keys set for this grade. The choice of suitable chords, using any recognized method of notation, at cadential points of a simple melody in the major key of C, G, D or F.
- 5 The composition of a simple melody of not more than eight bars, using a given opening and writing for a specific instrument (some choice will be given) *or*, at the candidate's choice, the composition of a melody to given words. Appropriate performing directions relating to tempo, dynamics and articulation will be required.
- 6 More terms and signs. The recognition of ornaments, including the replacement of written-out ornamentation with the appropriate signs, but not vice versa. Questions about a passage of music written for voices or instruments appropriate to the grade will include questions on the types of voice and names of instruments, the clefs they use, instrument family groups and the basic way by which they produce sound, as well as points of general musical observation designed to test the candidate's ability to apply theoretical knowledge to actual music.

## Theory GRADE 6

As in preceding grades. The harmonic vocabulary expected will include: the use of  $\frac{5}{3}$ ,  $\frac{6}{3}$  and  $\frac{6}{4}$  chords on any degree of the major or minor (harmonic and melodic) scale; the recognition of the dominant seventh chord in root position, first, second and third inversions, and the supertonic seventh chord in root position and first inversion, in any major or minor key; and the figuring for all these chords. An understanding of the principles of modulation and a knowledge of cadences, ornamentation and melodic decoration (which might include passing notes, auxiliary notes, appoggiaturas, changing notes and notes of anticipation) will also be expected. Questions will cover:

- 1 Writing specified chords for voices in four parts *or* for keyboard (at the candidate's choice) above a given bass part of about four bars.
- 2 The indication of suitable chords for the accompaniment of a diatonic melody of about eight bars in any key, using any recognized method of notation, *or*, at the candidate's choice, the provision of a bass to a given melody, adding figures to indicate the intended harmonies.
- 3 Composition of a melody for a specified instrument (a choice will be given), using a given opening. Modulation to the dominant, subdominant, relative major or relative minor may be required.
- 4 Questions on short extracts of music written for piano or in open score for voices or for any combination of instruments and/or voices, designed to test the candidate's knowledge of the elements and notation of music, including the realization of ornaments, the identification and notation of underlying harmonic structure, phrase structure, style, performance, and on the voices and instruments for which the works were written.

## Theory GRADE 7

As in preceding grades, with the addition of recognition of all diatonic secondary seventh chords and their inversions, the Neapolitan sixth and the diminished seventh chords, and of all figures commonly used by composers during the period c.1620–1790 to indicate harmonies above a bass part. Questions will cover:

- 1 The indication of chords and movement of the inner parts by figuring the bass in a passage in which both the melody and bass are given.
- 2 Rewriting a given passage to include appropriate suspensions and notes of melodic decoration.
- 3 Continuation of a given opening for solo instrument with keyboard accompaniment, which will be given in full throughout the passage, by completing the solo part, *or*, at the candidate's choice, composition of a melody for a specified instrument (a choice will be given) based on a given progression of chords or melodic figure.
- 4 Questions on short extracts of music written for piano or in open score for voices or for any combination of instruments and/or voices, designed to test the candidate's knowledge of the elements and notation of music, including the realization of ornaments, the identification and notation of underlying harmonic structure, phrase structure, style, performance, and on the voices and instruments for which the works were written.

## Theory GRADE 8

As in preceding grades. The harmonic vocabulary expected will include all standard diatonic and chromatic chords. Questions will cover:

- 1 Continuation of a given opening of a passage from a Baroque trio sonata for two treble instruments and basso continuo. The basso continuo part will be given throughout and fully figured (but a realization for keyboard will not be required).
- 2 Completion of an outline of a short passage for keyboard. Some knowledge of the styles practised by composers from the time of Haydn onwards will be assumed.
- 3 Continuation of a given opening of a melody for a specified instrument (a choice will be given).
- 4 Questions on short extracts of music written for piano or in open score for voices or for any combination of instruments and/or voices, designed to test the candidate's knowledge of the elements and notation of music, including the realization of ornaments, the identification and notation of underlying harmonic structure, phrase structure, style, performance, and on the voices and instruments for which the works were written.