

BOWED STRING PRACTICAL GRADES: requirements and information

This syllabus is valid for 2020–2023.

This section provides a summary of the most important points that teachers and candidates need to know when taking ABRSM Practical Grades for bowed string instruments. Further details, as well as administrative information about the exams, are given in ABRSM's Exam Regulations (available at www.abrsm.org/examregulations) which should be read before making an exam booking.

Changes in the 2020–2023 syllabus

There are two main changes in this syllabus:

- Initial Grade is introduced; this pre-Grade 1 exam follows the format of Grades 1–8 and is assessed using the same marking criteria
- A string accompaniment option is offered for some pieces at Grades Initial–3.

Entering for an exam

Eligibility: There are nine grades of exam for each instrument. Candidates may be entered for any grade at any age and do not need to have taken other grade(s) on the same instrument. Candidates for a Grade 6, 7 or 8 exam must have already passed ABRSM Grade 5 (or above) in Music Theory, Practical Musicianship or a Practical Grades solo Jazz instrument; for full details, including a list of accepted alternatives, see www.abrsm.org/prerequisite.

Access: ABRSM is committed to providing all candidates with fair access to its assessments by putting in place access arrangements and reasonable adjustments. There is a range of alternative tests and formats as well as guidelines for candidates with specific needs (see www.abrsm.org/specifneeds). Where a candidate's needs are not covered by the guidelines, each case is considered individually. Further information is available from the Access Co-ordinator (accesscoordinator@abrsm.ac.uk).

Exam booking: Details of exam dates, locations, fees and how to book an exam are available online at www.abrsm.org/exambooking.

Instruments

Candidates are required to perform on acoustic instruments (electric instruments are not allowed). Any size of instrument may be used; Viola candidates may play on a violin strung as a viola. Examiners apply the marking criteria (which include the assessment of pitch, tone and musical shaping) to assess musical outcomes without reference to the specific attributes of the instrument.

Elements of the exam

All ABRSM Practical bowed string exams consist of: three Pieces; Scales and arpeggios; Sight-reading; and Aural tests. In all grades, marks are allocated as follows:

Pieces: 1	30
2	30
3	30
Scales and arpeggios	21
Sight-reading	21
Aural tests	18
Total	150

Marking scheme: Exams are marked out of 150. 100 marks are required for a Pass, 120 for a Merit and 130 for a Distinction. Candidates do not need to pass each section to pass overall. See pp.106–107 for the marking criteria used by examiners.

Pieces

Musicians learn to play an instrument to explore and perform repertoire, which is why pieces are at the core of the exam – candidates are asked to present three at each grade. The syllabus repertoire is organised into three lists which explore different traditions and styles, dating from the Renaissance period to the present day.

Choosing one piece from each list gives candidates the opportunity to play a balanced selection and demonstrate a range of skills. In this syllabus, the pieces are broadly grouped into lists by the characteristics of the music:

- List A pieces are generally faster moving and require technical agility
- List B pieces are more lyrical and invite expressive playing
- List C pieces reflect a wide variety of musical traditions, styles and characters.

Most of the pieces require an accompaniment, as interacting with other musicians is an important musical skill, but there are also opportunities to choose solo pieces and develop confidence with unaccompanied playing.

We hope that by offering this variety in the syllabus, candidates will find music that inspires them and that they enjoy learning and performing.

Programme planning: Candidates must choose one piece from each of the three lists (A, B and C)*. In the exam, candidates should tell the examiner which pieces they are performing, and they are welcome to use the form on p. 108 for this.

Every effort has been made to feature a broad range of repertoire to suit and appeal to candidates of different ages, backgrounds and interests. Certain pieces may not be suitable for every candidate for technical reasons or because of wider context (historical, cultural, subject matter of the larger work from which it is drawn, lyrics if an arrangement of a song etc.). Pieces should be carefully considered for their appropriateness to each individual, which may need consultation between teachers and parents/guardians. Teachers and parents/guardians should also exercise caution when allowing younger candidates to research pieces online: www.nspcc.org.uk/onlinesafety.

* Grade 8 Violin candidates must choose at least one accompanied piece (there are solo pieces on all three lists).

The repertoire lists are the same as for ABRSM Performance Grades. Candidates may not present the same repertoire (in full or individual pieces) for the same grade of both qualifications, irrespective of when the exams are taken.

Accompaniment: A live piano or string (where the option is listed) accompaniment is required for all pieces, except those which are published as studies or unaccompanied works (these are marked **SOLO** in the syllabus list).

At Grades Initial–3, candidates may perform some or all of their pieces with a string accompaniment. Pieces that are published as duets (or with string accompaniment only) are marked **DUET** in the syllabus list. Pieces that are published with piano and string accompaniment options are marked **PF/VN**, **PF/VA**, **PF/VC**, or **PF/DB** in the syllabus list, and may be performed with either accompaniment in the exam.

Candidates must provide their own accompanist(s), who can only be in the exam room while accompanying. The candidate's teacher may accompany (examiners will not). If necessary, an accompanist may simplify any part of the accompaniment, as long as the result is musical. Recorded accompaniments are not allowed.

Exam music & editions: Wherever the syllabus includes an arrangement or transcription (appearing as 'arr.' or 'trans.' in the syllabus list), the edition listed in the syllabus must be used in the exam. For all other pieces, editions are listed for guidance only and candidates may use any edition of their choice (in- or out-of-print or downloadable). Information on sourcing exam music is given on p. 13.

Interpreting the score: Printed editorial suggestions such as fingering, bowing, metronome marks, realisation of ornaments etc. do not need to be strictly observed. Whether the piece contains musical indications or not, candidates are encouraged to interpret the score in a musical and stylistic way. Examiners' marking will be determined by how control of pitch, time, tone, shape and performance contributes to the overall musical outcome.

Vibrato: The use and control of vibrato, and its effect on tone and shape, will be taken into account by examiners, who will be assessing the overall musical outcome. Pieces that are heavily reliant on vibrato for their full musical effect tend not to appear in the syllabus before around Grade 5.

Repeats: Unless the syllabus specifies differently, all *da capo* and *dal segno* indications should be followed but other repeats (including first-time bars) should not be played unless they are very short (i.e. a few bars).

Cadenzas & tuttis: Cadenzas should not be played unless the syllabus specifies differently. Accompanists should cut lengthy orchestral tutti sections.

Performing from memory: Candidates may perform any of their pieces from memory; if doing so, they must make sure that a copy of the music is available for the examiner to refer to. No extra marks are awarded for playing from memory.

Page-turns: Examiners will be understanding if a page-turn causes a lack of continuity during a piece, and this will not affect the marking. Candidates (and accompanists) may use an extra copy of the music or a photocopy of a section of the piece (but see 'Photocopies' on p. 11) to help with page-turns. Candidates and accompanists at Grades 6–8 may bring a page-turner to the exam if there is no solution to a particularly awkward page-turn (prior permission is not required; the turner may be the candidate's teacher). Examiners are unable to help with page-turning.

Photocopies: Performing from unauthorised photocopies (or other kinds of copies) or illegal downloads of copyright editions is not allowed. ABRSM may withhold the exam result where it has evidence of an illegal copy (or copies) being used. In the UK, copies may be used in certain limited circumstances – for full details, see the MPA’s *Code of Fair Practice* at www.mpaonline.org.uk. In all other cases, application should be made to the copyright holder before any copy is made, and evidence of permission should be brought to the exam.

Scales and arpeggios

Playing scales and arpeggios is important for building strong technical skills such as reliable finger movement, hand position, co-ordination and fingerboard fluency. It also helps to develop tone, pitch and interval awareness, and familiarity with keys and their related patterns. This leads to greater confidence and security when sight-reading, learning new pieces and performing – from a score or from memory, as a solo musician or with others.

Memory: All requirements should be played from memory.

Range: All requirements should be played from the lowest possible tonic/starting note unless the syllabus specifies differently. They should ascend and descend according to the specified range (and pattern).

Rhythm: For most major and minor scales (and double-stop scales in parallel sixths/octaves) candidates may choose between two rhythm patterns: even notes *or* long tonic. The scale to a fifth (Initial Grade) should be played in even notes.

Patterns: Arpeggios and dominant sevenths are required in root position only. All dominant sevenths should finish by resolving on the tonic. Examples of scale/arpeggio etc. patterns found in this syllabus are given on pp. 14–15. Fully notated versions of the requirements are published by ABRSM.

Fingering: Candidates may use any fingering that produces a successful musical outcome.

Speed: Bowing will generally dictate the tempi of slurred scales and arpeggios. Separately-bowed requirements should be played briskly, using no more than half the bow length. The speeds on pp. 16–19 are given as a general guide.

In the exam: Initial Grade candidates should play all three requirements when asked for their scales. The examiner will prompt the keys/ranges where necessary.

At Grades 1–8, examiners will usually ask for at least one of each scale/arpeggio (etc.) type. They will ask for majors followed by minors within each type, and also ask to hear a balance of the separately-bowed and slurred requirements. When asking for requirements, examiners will specify:

- the key* (including minor form – harmonic *or* melodic – in the Grade 6–8 scales) or the starting note
- separate bows *or* slurred (except for where the requirements are to be prepared with separate bows *only* – e.g. Grade 1 arpeggios).

* Where keys at Grades 6–8 are listed enharmonically – D \flat /C \sharp and A \flat /G \sharp – the examiner will use the flat spelling when asking for major keys and the sharp spelling for minor keys.

Sight-reading

Sight-reading is a valuable skill with many benefits. Learning to sight-read helps to develop quick recognition of keys, tonality and common rhythm patterns. Strong sight-reading skills make learning new pieces quicker and easier, and also help when making music with others, so that playing in an ensemble becomes more rewarding and enjoyable.

Candidates will be asked to play a short unaccompanied piece of music which they have not seen before. They will be given half a minute to look through and, if they wish, try out all or any part of the test before they are asked to play it for assessment. The tables on pp.20–21 show the elements that are introduced at each grade.

For practice purposes, sample sight-reading tests are published by ABRSM.

Aural tests

Listening lies at the heart of music-making and the ability to hear how music works helps with all aspects of musical development. Aural skills help with gauging the sound and balance of playing, keeping in time and playing with a sense of rhythm and pulse. These skills also help to develop a sense of pitch, musical memory and the ability to spot mistakes.

The requirements are the same for all four instruments. Full details of the Aural tests are given on pp.94–101.

In the exam

Examiners: Generally, there will be one examiner in the exam room; however a second examiner may be present for training and quality assurance purposes. Examiners may ask to look at the candidate's or accompanist's copy of the music before or after the performance of a piece; a separate copy is not required. Examiners may stop the performance of a piece when they have heard enough to make a judgment. They will not issue or discuss a candidate's result; the mark form (and certificate for successful candidates) will be issued by ABRSM after the exam.

Order of the exam: The individual sections of the exam may be taken in any order, at the candidate's choice, although it is preferable for accompanied pieces to be performed consecutively at the beginning of the exam.

Tuning: At Grades Initial–5, the teacher or accompanist may tune the candidate's instrument (or advise on tuning) before the exam begins. At Grades 6–8, candidates must tune their instruments themselves. Examiners are unable to help with tuning.

Seating: Double Bass candidates should provide their own stool if required. A chair/stool will be provided for cello candidates at ABRSM public venues.

Music stands: All ABRSM public venues provide a music stand, but candidates are welcome to bring their own if they prefer. The examiner will be happy to help adjust the height or position of the stand.

Assessment

The tables on pp. 106–107 show the marking criteria used by examiners. Examiners mark up or down from the pass mark for each element by balancing the extent to which the qualities and skills listed on pp. 106–107 (broadly categorised by pitch, time, tone, shape and performance) are demonstrated and contribute towards the overall musical outcome.

Sourcing exam music

Exam music is available from music retailers and online, including at the ABRSM music shop: www.abrsm.org/shop. Every effort has been made to make sure that the publications listed will be available for the duration of the syllabus. Candidates are advised to get their music well before the exam in case items are not kept in stock by retailers. Non-exam related questions about the music (e.g. editorial, availability) should be addressed to the relevant publisher: contact details are listed at www.abrsm.org/publishers.

SCALE AND ARPEGGIO PATTERNS

The examples below clarify patterns found in this syllabus. The full requirements for each instrument and grade are listed on the relevant syllabus pages. See also p. 11.

RHYTHM PATTERNS FOR SCALES

For major scales (all grades) and minor scales (Grades 1–8), candidates may choose between two rhythm patterns: even notes *or* long tonic. (Chromatic scales should always be played with even notes.)

even notes

or

long tonic



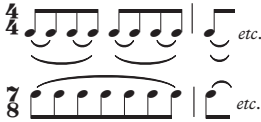
SLURRING PATTERNS FOR SCALES

even notes

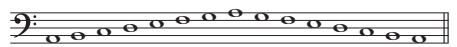
or

long tonic

2 quavers:
2 beats:
7 notes:



NATURAL MINOR SCALE



SCALE to a fifth



DOMINANT SEVENTH (resolving on tonic)



DOUBLE-STOP SCALES

In broken steps

in sixths:



in octaves:



in thirds:



DOUBLE-STOP SCALES (cont.)**In parallel****even notes***or* **long tonic**

in sixths:



in octaves:

**Patterns for Double Bass only****SCALES** to a sixth**even notes***or* **long tonic****SCALES** to a twelfth**even notes***or* **long tonic****ARPEGGIOS** to a twelfth**SCALE IN BROKEN THIRDS****SCALE IN RUNNING THIRDS**

SCALE AND ARPEGGIO SPEEDS

The following speeds are given as a general guide:

VIOLIN	Grade/Speed									
	pattern	Initial	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Scales		♩ = 46	♩ = 52	♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 69	♩ = 80	♩ = 92	♩ = 104	♩ = 120
Arpeggios		♩ = 104	♩ = 104	♩ = 116	♩ = 40	♩ = 42	♩ = 44	♩ = 46	♩ = 48	♩ = 50
Chromatic scales			♩ = 63		♩ = 63	♩ = 69	♩ = 80	♩ = 60	♩ = 104	♩ = 120
Dim. & Dim. 7ths *						♩ = 63	♩ = 66	♩ = 69	♩ = 72	♩ = 76
Double-stop scales (in broken steps)								♩ = 92	♩ = 104	♩ = 120
Double-stop scales (in parallel)										♩ = 72









* Dim. 7ths from Grade 5

The following speeds are given as a general guide:

		Grade/Speed							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Scales	pattern								
	Initial	♩ = 42	♩ = 54	♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 72	♩ = 84	♩ = 96	♩ = 112
Arpeggios	pattern	♩ = 96	♩ = 108	♩ = 112	♩ = 116	♩ = 40	♩ = 42	♩ = 44	♩ = 46
	Initial			♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 72	♩ = 56	♩ = 96	♩ = 112
Chromatic scales	pattern								
	Initial			♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 72	♩ = 56	♩ = 96	♩ = 112
Dom. & Dim. 7ths *	pattern								
	Initial			♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 72	♩ = 56	♩ = 96	♩ = 112
Double-stop scales (in broken steps)	pattern								
	Initial			♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 72	♩ = 56	♩ = 96	♩ = 112
Double-stop scales (in parallel)	pattern								
	Initial			♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 72	♩ = 56	♩ = 96	♩ = 112

* Dim. 7ths from Grade 5

The following speeds are given as a general guide:

CELLO	Grade/Speed									
	pattern	Initial	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Scales	 or 	♩ = 76	♩ = 44	♩ = 50	♩ = 54	♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 72	♩ = 84	♩ = 100
Arpeggios			♩ = 88	♩ = 100	♩ = 104	♩ = 108	♩ = 112	♩ = 116	♩ = 40	♩ = 42
Chromatic scales				♩ = 54	♩ = 58	♩ = 63	♩ = 84	♩ = 100		
Dom. & Dim. 7ths *					♩ = 54	♩ = 58	♩ = 60	♩ = 63		
Double-stop scales (in broken steps)						♩ = 72	♩ = 84	♩ = 100		
Double-stop scales (in parallel)	 or 									♩ = 60

* Dim. 7ths from Grade 5

The following speeds are given as a general guide:

DOUBLE BASS		Grade/Speed								
	pattern	Initial	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Scales		$\text{♩} = 76$	$\text{♩} = 40$	$\text{♩} = 42$	$\text{♩} = 44$	$\text{♩} = 46$	$\text{♩} = 50$	$\text{♩} = 56$	$\text{♩} = 63$	$\text{♩} = 76$
Arpeggios		$\text{♩} = 40$	$\text{♩} = 40$	$\text{♩} = 42$	$\text{♩} = 44$	$\text{♩} = 92$	$\text{♩} = 100$	$\text{♩} = 104$	$\text{♩} = 108$	$\text{♩} = 112$
Chromatic scales			$\text{♩} = 88$	$\text{♩} = 92$	$\text{♩} = 92$	$\text{♩} = 92$	$\text{♩} = 100$	$\text{♩} = 56$	$\text{♩} = 42$	$\text{♩} = 50$
Dom. & Dim. 7ths*				$\text{♩} = 46$	$\text{♩} = 50$	$\text{♩} = 52$	$\text{♩} = 54$	$\text{♩} = 56$		$\text{♩} = 56$
Scale in broken and running thirds♦										$\text{♩} = 50$
Double-stop scales (in broken steps)									$\text{♩} = 84$	$\text{♩} = 100$

* Dim. 7ths from Grade 5

♦ Scale in broken thirds (Grade 6) and in running thirds (Grade 8)

SIGHT-READING PARAMETERS

The tables on pp. 20–21 show the elements that are introduced at each grade. These parameters are presented cumulatively, i.e. once introduced they apply for all later grades (gradually progressing in difficulty). See also p.12.

	Length (bars)	Time	Other features that may be included
Initial Grade	4	4/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1st position • ♩ and ♪ note values; ♯ rests
	6	2/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • notes separately bowed • <i>mf</i>
Grade 1	4	3/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ♩ and ♪ note values • <i>f</i> and <i>p</i> • <i>Double Bass</i>: 1st or half position, at candidate's choice
Grade 2	8		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ♩; ♯ rests • simple two-note slurs • <i>mp</i>; <i>cresc.</i> and <i>dim.</i> hairpins • <i>Double Bass</i>: 1st position only
Grade 3			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accidentals (within minor keys) • ♩, ♪ and ♪ note values; simple semiquaver patterns; ♯ rests • tied notes • staccato; <i>pizzicato</i> (at end) • <i>Double Bass</i>: half or 1st position, at examiner's choice
Grade 4	c. 8	6/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shifts between: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Violin & Viola</i>: 1st and 3rd positions • <i>Cello</i>: 1st and 4th positions • <i>Double Bass</i>: half, 1st and 3rd positions (no more than two positions per test) • chromatic notes • anacrusis • hooked bowing • tenuto, accents • pause sign • <i>pp</i> and <i>ff</i>
Grade 5	c. 8–16		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shifts as required to cover range • simple syncopation • changes between <i>arco</i> and <i>pizzicato</i> • slowing of tempo (at end) • <i>Violin, Viola & Cello</i>: simple chords (at end)
Grade 6	c. 12–16	9/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • triplet patterns
		5/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slowing of tempo followed by <i>a tempo</i>
		5/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Viola</i>: treble clef • <i>Double Bass</i>: simple chords (at end)
Grade 7	c. 16–20	7/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Violin & Viola</i>: left-hand <i>pizzicato</i>
		7/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cello & Double Bass</i>: tenor clef
Grade 8	c. 16–24	12/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acceleration of tempo • simple ornaments • <i>Violin</i>: 8va sign • <i>Cello</i>: left-hand <i>pizzicato</i> • <i>Cello & Double Bass</i>: treble clef

KEYS MAJORS minors *	Violin	Viola	Cello	Double Bass ♦
Initial Grade	D, A	G, D	G, D	G, D
Grade 1	—	—	—	G, D <i>or</i> F, B♭ ◊
Grade 2	G e	C a	C a	C, G, D a
Grade 3	C, F, B♭ a, d, g	F, B♭, E♭ d, g, c	A, F, B♭ d, g	F, B♭ b
Grade 4	E♭	A	E♭ c	A e, d
Grade 5	E, A♭ b, c	E, A♭ e, f♯	e	g
Grade 6	c♯	f	—	E♭ c
Grade 7	f♯	b, c♯	E, A♭ b, f	E f♯
Grade 8	B, D♭ f	B, D♭	f♯	A♭ f

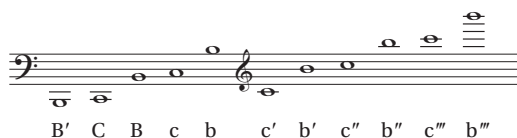
RANGES §	Violin	Viola	Cello	Double Bass
Initial Grade	d'-g', a'-d''	g-c', d'-g'	G-c, d-g	g-b, d-f♯
Grade 1	d'-a''	g-d''	G-d'	d-b <i>or</i> F-f ◊
Grade 2	g-a''	c-d''	C-d'	E-b
Grade 3	g-b''	c-e''	C-d'	E-b
Grade 4	g-d'''	c-g''	C-g'	E-d'
Grade 5	g-e'''	c-a''	C-a'	E-e'
Grade 6	g-e'''	c-a''	C-a'	E-g'
Grade 7	g-g'''	c-b''	C-b♭'	E-a'
Grade 8	g-a'''	c-c'''	C-d''	E-c''

* Minors – natural form at Grade 2, any form from Grade 3

♦ Keys cumulative from Grade 2

◊ 1st or half position, at candidate's choice

§ Ranges are presented using the Helmholtz system, i.e.:



AURAL TESTS: included in all Practical Music graded exams*

Listening lies at the heart of all good music-making. Developing aural awareness is fundamental to musical training because having a ‘musical ear’ impacts on all aspects of musicianship. Singing, both silently in the head and out loud, is one of the best ways to develop the ‘musical ear’. It connects the internal imagining of sound, the ‘inner ear’, with the external creation of it, without the necessity of mechanically having to ‘find the note’ on an instrument (important though that connection is). By integrating aural activities in imaginative ways in the lesson, preparation for the aural tests within an exam will be a natural extension of what is already an essential part of the learning experience.

In the exam

Aural tests are an integral part of all Practical Music graded exams.

The tests are administered by the examiner from the piano. For any test that requires a sung response, pitch rather than vocal quality is being assessed. The examiner will be happy to adapt to the vocal range of the candidate, whose responses may be sung to any vowel (or consonant followed by a vowel), hummed or whistled (and at a different octave, if appropriate).

Assessment

Some tests allow for a second attempt or for an additional playing by the examiner, if necessary. The examiner will also be ready to prompt, where helpful, although this may affect the assessment.

Marks are not awarded for each individual test or deducted for mistakes; instead they reflect the candidate’s overall response in this section. The marking criteria for the aural tests are given on p. 107.

Sample tests

Examples of the tests for Grades Initial–8 are given in *Specimen Aural Tests*. More examples for Grades 1–8 are given in *Aural Training in Practice*. These publications are available to buy from music retailers and from www.abrsm.org/shop.

Deaf or hearing-impaired candidates

Deaf or hearing-impaired candidates may choose alternative tests in place of the standard tests, if requested at the time of entry. Further information, including the syllabus for the alternative tests, is available at www.abrsm.org/specifneeds.