MUSICIANSHIP MATTERS

A handbook for musicianship studies

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Introduction

Why does musicianship matter so much?

...Because understanding the nuts and bolts of how music works gives us a deeper, more informed perspective on the pieces that we perform, and, by investigating the historical contexts from which they arise, we can gain useful insight into the interpretation of the music, complementing individual study lessons, and become all-round, thinking musicians.

...Because having a keen aural awareness (‘good ears’) enables us to focus carefully on the sounds we produce on our own instruments and with our voices as well as when listening to other musicians, thereby enhancing our performance skills and critical faculties.

...Because, especially for aspiring composers, mastering the technical challenges of traditional harmony and counterpoint and being able to hear sound in the mind’s ear (audiation) are important and necessary steps towards expressing creative ideas precisely and effectively.

ABRSM Theory and Practical Musicianship exam sittings take place at RCM in the Summer Term [June]. Grade 5 (Intermediate) Practical Musicianship has an equivalent weighting to Grade 5 Theory, and both enable progression to Grades 6 and above practical (instrumental/vocal) exams.

Classes will reflect this holistic approach to the teaching of theoretical and practical skills — two sides of the same coin — and the essential role the student’s creativity plays in the learning process. Whichever exam option is taken, theory and practical musicianship will be taught throughout the year as a combined, inter-disciplinary subject, along with musical history and analysis.

How relevant these classes are to you (and how useful they are) also depends on your participation! Take every opportunity to ask questions about any aspect of musical theory, technique, vocabulary, context and style.

What you must bring to every musicianship class:

- Sharp pencil, eraser, pen, pencil sharpener
- A manuscript book (clearly marked with student’s name)
- Your copy of this handbook

Please also note that completion of past papers is an essential part of the preparation for theory exams and it is expected that each student will purchase copies of these when requested by their teacher.

Your teacher may provide worksheets and handouts. It is your responsibility to file these (and bring them back if recommended by the teacher). It would be useful to have a dedicated folder (ring-binder) with dividers, in order to file them effectively and save time when you need to retrieve them. Teachers will not be expected to reprint worksheets, which have already been given.

Attendance and Punctuality

In order to get the maximum benefit from the musicianship curriculum, 100% attendance is needed for classes; registers are taken weekly and checked on a regular basis. Please ensure that you arrive as promptly as possible for your class. If you have a valid reason for absence, you must seek permission from the JD office to be excused. If absence is agreed, a member of JD administrative staff will sign an absence agreement slip which will be either given to the teacher (if absence is agreed in advance of a Saturday) or must be taken to the teacher by the student (if absence is only sought on the day). If this process is not followed, the absence will be deemed to be unauthorised.
The Classes

**F – Foundation Level** (one or two year course)
This level of class lays the foundations of musical theory and practical musicianship.

**I – Intermediate Level** (one year course)
The central focus of this level is ABRSM Grade 5 Theory and Intermediate Practical Musicianship. Students will be expected to take one or other of these examinations in the Summer Term.

**Tr – Transitions** (one year course)
This class is broadly recommended for younger students who have gained ABRSM Grade 5 Theory or Intermediate Practical Musicianship and is a bridge towards the more advanced work at Upper Level.

**U – Upper Level/H - Higher Level** (U classes are for years 7-9 and H classes for years 10-12) (one year programmes)
The central focus of this level is ABRSM Grade 6 Theory and related practical musicianship skills. All aspects of the ABRSM Grade 6 and Advanced Practical Musicianship syllabuses will be covered. At the end of the academic year students will (after discussion/consultation with their teacher) elect to enter either a T6 or Advanced Practical Musicianship class the following year.

**T6** (one year course)
This class is a continuation and consolidation of Upper Level work, and students will be expected to take the ABRSM Grade 6 Theory Examination in the Summer Term. (NB progression to this class is compulsory for first study composition students).

**A – Advanced Practical Musicianship** (one year course)
This class is a continuation and consolidation of Upper Level work and students will be expected to take the ABRSM Advanced Practical Musicianship examination in the Summer Term.

After passing either Grade 6 Theory or Advanced Practical Musicianship Exams, students will elect (after discussion/consultation with their teacher) to take one of the following classes for the next academic year.

**T7** (one year course) & **T8** (one year course)
T7 prepares students to take the ABRSM Grade 7 Theory Examination in the Summer Term, and may be followed the next year by T8 (preparation for taking the ABRSM Grade 8 Theory Examination in the Summer Term). Both T7 and T8 classes continue to develop complementary practical musicianship skills.

**Comp – Composition Class** (one year course)
A composition class gives students the opportunity to apply knowledge of theory and experience of practical musicianship to the practice of composition. Students will be encouraged, under the guidance of their teacher, to experiment (in terms of how to develop musical ideas and in finding new sound possibilities). Rehearsal skills, which may involve conducting, will be developed. Although the emphasis of this class is on creativity and discovery, continued aural training remains a fundamental component.

**Imp – Improvisation Class** (one year course)
An improvisation class gives students the opportunity to develop improvisation skills and techniques in a variety of styles from Baroque embellishment to jazz and beyond (eg intuitive group improvisation) both on your principal study instrument (where this is not the piano) and at the keyboard. Though the emphasis of this class is on creativity and discovery, continued aural training remains a fundamental component.

**Cond – Conducting Class** (10 students max)
These classes taught by Robert Hodge, provide students with the opportunity to develop their conducting skills in a small group context. Priority is given to students in Years 12 – 13 and classes will be scheduled in years where teacher availability allows.

**S – Sixth Form Level** (one or two year course)
These classes are intended for students in sixth form (school years 12 and 13) not taking Composition, Improvisation or graded theory exam classes. Work covered includes consolidation of historical, analytical and theoretical studies, aural skills and general musicianship, and is particularly useful for those preparing for Conservatoire/University music study.

**Pre-Con – Pre-Conservatoire Class** (one year course)
This class has been designed for students who are in year 13 and who are applying to study at the RCM; it will be taught by JD teachers who are also RCM academic professors. Work covered will prepare students for RCM undergraduate courses. Pupils completing this course may be eligible to take some Level 5 (2nd year undergraduate) courses in their first year at RCM.
Examination Entry

It is expected that all students in Intermediate, T6, Advanced Practical Musicianship, T7 and T8 classes will take the relevant ABRSM Theory or Practical Musicianship Examination in mid-June. Each teacher will cover the syllabus with time to review and complete past papers (theory) or administer mock exams (practical musicianship). Students are required to complete homework (including past papers when appropriate) on a weekly basis as set by their teacher.

Student progress will be monitored by teachers throughout the year and parents will be advised if work is not of a satisfactory standard. Entries for June ABRSM Theory and PM Examinations are administrated by the Junior Department, acting on the advice of musicianship teachers, whose decisions must be treated as final. Once candidates’ names have been entered at the start of the Summer term, parents will be informed and invoiced accordingly and are required to make the appropriate payment to RCMJD by the date indicated.

Students wishing to take Theory or Practical Musicianship Examinations in the Autumn/Spring terms should first discuss this with their teacher and, if agreement is given, must seek written permission from the Head of Aural & Musicianship. It is then the responsibility of the student (or their parents) to arrange to take the exam at a local centre – RCMJD does not enter students for Theory or Practical Musicianship exams in any term other than the Summer. Please inform your teacher and the JD office of the result.

Homework

It is expected that all students in musicianship classes will undertake homework as required. Typically, homework set per week should take you between 20 and 40 minutes to complete.

It might prove very productive to note down any questions you might have while working on your homework tasks. Discussing these topics in the following lesson will accelerate your progress. On the other hand, items such as foreign vocabulary, ornaments and instruments’ range can be looked up in dictionaries, encyclopaedias and on the internet. Taking ownership of your learning outside lessons will dramatically improve your musicianship! It will also help you establish independent research skills, essential for your future learning in any subject.

Support

If at any time there is something you are studying in class (or a homework task) that you do not fully understand, please let your musicianship teacher know. Concepts and techniques can be quite complex sometimes and it is important to have a secure understanding before moving on to more advanced work. Never feel uncomfortable about asking for help – this is what your teacher is there for.

Group and pair work can be an important form of consolidating your knowledge. Participate actively and do not hesitate to ask questions but also offer answers and suggestions, when possible. Try to help others when the topic covered lies within your expertise.

Ask your teacher for recommendations of books, scores, recordings and internet resources, whether for revision or just for extended learning.

Aural training and Assessments

Aural skills are a necessary prerequisite for all areas of musical study, both practical and theoretical. All musicianship classes, including Composition and Improvisation classes, contain a strong aural component. In addition, dedicated Aural Classes are available (subject to the feasibility of each year’s timetable) to provide support in developing general aural skills as well as supplementing the training/preparation for ABRSM graded Practical Examination aural tests that students receive in their individual study lessons. The Department’s formal assessment process includes aural tests appropriate to your musicianship class level. Much of the Aural Class is linked to sight-singing. A bit of sight-singing can be done every week; that way the progress is slower but guaranteed. Ask your teacher for resources.