

Trinity College London Piano Syllabus 2018-20

The new Trinity Piano Syllabus offers a range of books complete with pieces, exercises and an overview of the requirements for each examination. As someone who has traditionally followed the ABRSM path, it has been my pleasure to survey the full panoply of Trinity's revamped syllabus. It is soon evident that much care has been taken here to provide a diverse and inspiring range of piano music.

One of my first thoughts when perusing this collection was: are these books friendly looking and immediately appealing? Would they capture a learner's imagination or make them wonder about the contents? I'm not overly sure about this: compared with the engaging motifs and artwork used on the cover of the ABRSM books they do seem rather staid. I can recall vividly from my own days as a young learner the covers and illustrations which set my mind racing with a veritable cornucopia of ideas and fantasies. Opening the cover of the Trinity books reveals the clear and effective use of font and a 'user-friendly' score which may well promote reading skills. Even those with some learning difficulties could access the content of these books with relative ease, all of which is undoubtedly to be much commended. I do, however wonder if this is perhaps taken a bit too far at times, with some of the pieces appearing rather too simplified. My experience has taught me that young children are often capable of more and it may well be that these pieces miss the opportunity to stretch and challenge the more inquisitive of students.

Indeed, surveying the material up to and including Grade 3 led me to ponder the question, what is actually important in the early stages of learning (and teaching) the piano and how can this form a bedrock for promoting different branches of playing? Temporarily wearing my 'child's hat', I can see

a variety of 'fun' titles and, having played these, I appreciated the humorous links that could help the learner apply some character to their playing (witness the delightful *Poor Mouse* at Grade 1). Trinity have certainly 'tapped' into the pleasure and magic of playing here, particularly in the Grade 3 selection, with the energetic *Badlands* and *Rain* standing out especially. They should also be lauded for their continued inclusion of duet music through to Grade 3; amusement can be added by means of the *Tango-Prelude* by Schmitz. On the other hand, and speaking from a holistic perspective, it does appear to be the case that the repertoire choice dramatically improves the further on through the grades one progresses.

The Initial grade seems a trifle dull and lacks the fresh edge which has recently started to emerge in contemporary children's music. As a fan of June Armstrong's new range of books (which include the wonderful *Safari*), I was left wondering why Trinity could not explore the full range of the keyboard and more 'modern' tonalities in an exam? If my pupils are used to playing these more inventive and (from their perspective) inspiring works (using pedal from the outset - I notice that in the Trinity syllabus pedal finally appears, after a long wait, at Grade 3 level!) how will they feel when they are presented with this material in their exam? After all, isn't the fundamental job of music education to foster a love of music rather than adhere to the well-trodden but possibly tired strictures of the examination room?

For me, the true excitement starts at Grade 4 level, where the selections are replete with strong melodies and surprisingly catchy rhythms. The selection includes the enchanting *Ballo Gaio*, a more modern choice with somewhat more panache than some of its predecessors. In some ways, Grade 4 as a whole appears more daring than the Grade 5 compendium. It's a relief at this



stage to encounter some proper flourishes, though it could be argued that even more adventure could be had - perhaps some swapping over of the hands? How about something more mindful and reflective? The earlier repertoire could have been greatly enhanced by pieces that would more effectively get the pulse racing - a few exhilarating Sonata/Sonatina movements maybe? Accepting however that it is impossible to please all, I am excited by much of the variation I see here, particularly up to Grade 7.

In many ways I am a typical 'product' of the ABRSM route and as such I am fascinated by the difference in approach to scales and exercises that is in evidence between the boards. There is a more limited amount of scales required in the Trinity syllabus and instead technique is explored in a variety of different ways. The focus here is, *inter alia*, on co-ordination, balancing and tone, even if these are not all equally relevant to the pieces being played. Alberti Bass appears in the Grade 5 *Penny Farthing* and a form of rotation presents itself in the piece *And Now Let's Handel*, but it seems that little has been done to prepare the unwary learner for this beforehand. In the Initial Grade, some pieces seem to miss the point altogether; where, for example, is thumb technique? Quite often there is a nice range of styles covered here, maybe even more comprehensively than in the pieces themselves, but the term 'exercise' to me speaks of working on technical difficulties as well as more lyrical ones. Could these be linked to more traditional exercises, including perhaps the study of repeated notes and finger independence?

Trinity have clearly deployed a mixture of the old and the new here, some pieces having been used before - for example, *Intermezzo in B minor* by Brahms, which was included in the ABRSM syllabus for 2010-11. They have included core repertoire such as Debussy's *Minstrels* (Grade 8), which I agree is certainly beneficial to all. I also very much enjoyed *Remote* by Xianggelia (Grade 8) which makes a pleasant contrast to some of the other pieces, though possibly lacking the substance required for the more serious examination which Grade 8 is and should be. One could agree that all of these pieces when played at the expected level create their own challenges and leave a great deal of room for personal interpretation; however they do overall seem less virtuosic than the corresponding ABRSM Grade 8 repertoire. It seems a shame not to include something with more grandeur in a selection that should give ample opportunity for students to demonstrate some vigour and flair, partly as a celebration of their long, hard journey through the grades. After all, this is the culmination of everything they have learned, and it seems somewhat churlish not to allow them some sense of ceremony.

That said, it must be stressed that Trinity have successfully created a new syllabus that welcomes new ideas but which does not ignore the core repertoire. My aim in writing this review has been to provide a more global view of the syllabus and is in no way meant to disparage the often excellent work that Trinity have done. I feel sure that many teachers - myself included - will use this syllabus to the great pleasure and benefit of their students. For this Trinity should be both thanked and commended.

Amy Wakefield