



FALKNER HOUSE
LONDON

Music ABRSM Grade Guide

2026 - 2027



Boys

20 Penywern Road, London SW5 9SU

Girls

19 Brechin Place, London SW7 4QB



Music ABRSM Grade Guide

At Falkner House, we believe that music education should inspire curiosity, develop confidence, and foster a lifelong love of music. While music exams are not an end in themselves, they can be a valuable part of a child's musical journey, offering structure, encouragement, and opportunities to develop as a musician.

Examinations can provide clear goals and a sense of direction. With their different requirements, including pieces, scales, sight-reading, and aural tests, they give pupils a variety of specific areas to work towards. For children who enjoy concrete milestones, having an examination date can provide motivation and a clear sense of progress.

Examinations also offer valuable opportunities to develop performance experience in a setting different from that of a concert. Preparing to play for an examiner helps children become familiar with performing under a degree of pressure, managing nerves, and responding to the expectations of an unfamiliar situation. These experiences can help build resilience, self-awareness, and confidence that extend beyond music.

We believe that examinations should form just one part of a well-rounded musical education. It is important that children explore a wide variety of repertoire and musical experiences, including chamber music and orchestra, rather than spending a year or more preparing only three pieces and their associated scales. These pieces represent just a small part of the rich and diverse repertoire available to them. Ultimately, your child may never wish to become a professional musician, so we hope that their experiences at Falkner House will nurture a lifelong love of music, encouraging them to continue playing, listening, and discovering the joy of music throughout their lives.

Marking Breakdown

The ABRSM exam system is that the Grades run from Initial to Grade 8, and the breakdown of marking is as follows:

Distinction	130 and above
Merit	120-129
Pass	100-119

The grade is derived from the marks from the five sections of the exam:

List A piece	Maximum	30
List B piece	Maximum	30
List C piece	Maximum	30
Scales	Maximum	21
Sight-reading	Maximum	21
Aural tests	Maximum	18



There is no fixed timeline for beginning grade examinations, as readiness depends on a child's maturity and, most importantly, on their overall development as a musician. A grade exam cannot simply be worked through by buying the exam books and learning the required pieces. Children should first reach the appropriate level through their wider musical development — building technique, musical understanding and experience through a broad range of repertoire, much of which may have nothing to do with the exam.

Once a child has reached the appropriate level, the examination can be seen as a step to the side: an opportunity to apply and demonstrate skills they have already developed, while preparing for the specific requirements of the exam. When the groundwork has been done well, this preparation should be a relatively short and enjoyable process, rather than a long, repetitive one focused on a small number of pieces. It is important that exam preparation does not become tedious, as this can risk taking away from a child's enjoyment and wider interest in music. Teachers are best placed to judge when a child is ready for an examination and how much preparation is appropriate. Their role is to ensure that the exam complements the child's musical development, rather than becoming the focus of it.



There is therefore no need to rush children through grades. Some pupils may take a year or more before they are ready for their first exam, while others may progress more quickly. The time a child takes to reach a grade is not a reflection of how good or bad they are at their instrument, but rather how they respond to the examination process. Some children enjoy the structure, challenge and clear goals of exams and take to them readily; others may find the process less natural and benefit from more time to build confidence and become comfortable with it. Our aim is to ensure that each child progresses at a pace that supports their musical development and enjoyment of playing, so that when they do take a grade, it feels like a natural reflection of where they have reached as a musician, rather than the grade itself being the destination.

As a general rule of thumb, we find that working broadly in line with a child's year group provides a good pace of progression — for example, Grade 2 towards the end of Year 2. This is not a rigid expectation: it is perfectly normal for a child to be working towards a lower grade, and, in rarer cases, a higher grade, by the end of Year 5. What matters is that the grade reflects the child's overall musical development rather than becoming a target in itself. By the end of Year 5, a pupil working at a good, steady pace might typically be around Grade 5 level. It is also relatively unusual for pupils to take grade examinations in Year 6, when the focus naturally shifts towards other priorities. The higher grades can also become disproportionately demanding at this stage, and from Grade 6 onwards, pupils must have completed the Grade 5 Theory Exam before taking an instrumental exam. For these reasons, we do not expect pupils to pursue grade exams in Year 6.

It is possible to skip a grade examination, but it is not possible to skip the stage of musical development that bridges the gap to the next grade. For example, a pupil may choose not to sit Grade 2 and move on to Grade 3, but they should still have developed the technique and musicianship associated with Grade 2 through their wider repertoire. The exam can be skipped; the musical development cannot. For this reason, skipping an exam does not necessarily mean reaching the next grade any sooner. There are no shortcuts in the underlying musical development, so the desired grade may still be reached on much the same timescale — simply without sitting the intervening exam.



While examinations can be a useful part of a child's musical journey, they are only one way of measuring progress and should always be kept in perspective. Some children find the examination setting motivating, while others may find that nerves or the particular format of an exam do not allow them to show their musical ability at its best. The marking system can also favour consistency and accuracy on the day: a pupil who is particularly well prepared and makes very few mistakes may achieve a high mark, while a highly musical pupil who lets a few technical slips go may find that these are reflected disproportionately in the final result. An exam mark therefore does not always capture the qualities that make a musician — musicality, creativity, curiosity and the ability to communicate through music. Many accomplished musicians have developed without following an examination pathway, and a child can become a highly accomplished and enthusiastic musician without taking grades at all.

Soon after the start of each term, the individual music teachers decide on who will sit which grade exams and parents are informed. If your child happens to learn outside and you wish for them to sit a music exam, please get in touch with the school as we may be able to offer you a slot internally. In any case, the exam should be on a Saturday towards the end of term, and never on a school day.

Exam Preparation

- Scales are to be presented from memory.
- The three pieces may be played from the music.
- Sight reading will form part of your child's individual lessons
- Aural training is the fourth component of the exam

While the instrumental teacher may incorporate Aural Training into their lessons, 15-minute sessions (during breaks) run by our music teachers will be offered to those sitting the exam at the end of that term. In addition to that, we strongly recommend the official ABRSM Aural Training app.

Candidates sitting Grade 4 and above will have the opportunity to rehearse with the school accompanist during the two weeks leading up to the exam.

Examination Procedure for exams taken at Falkner House

Candidates take their ABRSM grade examinations at Falkner House, in the Big Room at 19 Brechin Place. Exam sessions are held three times a year, at the end of each term.

Once you know that your child will be sitting an exam, if you have a preference for a particular time on the Saturday, please let us know as early as possible and we will do our best to accommodate it. However, timings depend on a number of factors, including the availability of accompanists and the overall examination schedule, so we cannot guarantee specific times. Typically, an exam session starts at 9:00am.

Falkner House submits the entries for the examinations, and once these have been confirmed, parents will receive an email with all the relevant information, including the date, timings and other arrangements.



Examination Day

- Candidates should arrive 30 minutes before their scheduled examination time.
- A steward will be stationed in the school office to welcome candidates, facilitate entry into the school and escort them to the warm-up room on the second floor. A music teacher and, where required, the accompanist will be available to assist with tuning, warming up and rehearsing the pieces with accompaniment.
- The examination will take place in the Big Room and will be attended by the examiner and the candidate only. The accompanist will be present solely for the performance of the pieces.
- The examination will typically follow the order outlined below. Candidates will perform the three pieces (in any order), after which the accompanist will leave the room. The examination will then proceed with scales, sight-reading and aural tests. Candidates may, however, request to complete the sections in a different order.
 - **Scales** – The examiner will select a number of examples from the relevant syllabus. These will generally begin with scales, followed by arpeggios and anything else that may be required.
 - **Sight-reading** – the excerpt will be seen by the candidate for the first time and 30 seconds will be offered to prepare it before the examiner invites the candidate to play it. It is recommended that the candidates practise the excerpt, rather than simply looking through it; the examiner will not take that into consideration. Candidates should not expect to perform the excerpt perfectly. The primary objective is to maintain continuity without stopping, while demonstrating a secure rhythm, accurate intonation, appropriate dynamics and correct articulation.
 - **The Aural Tests** – the aural tests do not require the use of an instrument, as they will involve clapping, singing back, identifying changes and recognising musical features by listening to the examiner, who will be seated at the piano.
- Parents are kindly asked to leave their child at the school and return to collect them once the examination has concluded. Parents are not permitted to enter the examination room. Based on previous experience, parental presence, however well-intentioned, can have an adverse effect on a candidate's performance.
- With the exception of the accompanist's presence during the performance of the three pieces, the candidate will be alone with the examiner for the duration of the examination. Examiners are friendly, supportive and encouraging, and are keen to provide candidates with a positive opportunity to demonstrate their musical abilities.
- Where the examination is arranged by Falkner House, the examination fee, together with a contribution towards the cost of the steward and accompanist (where applicable) and the aural training fee, will be added to the invoice for the following term. Results are typically released within a few days. The school will notify parents by email as soon as the results are available and will provide both the certificate and mark form in electronic format. An original certificate will be ordered at a cost of £3.00 and will be presented to the candidate during a school assembly.
- If a pupil chooses to take music exams externally, the exam should be scheduled for out of school hours. Any absence from school for a music exam not arranged by Falkner House will be deemed unauthorised.

