
LESSON 2.1

READING ASSIGNMENT

Musical schools

Now that you have an accurate snapshot of your previous 6 months to 1 year of studies (the Learning Lists), and you have a sense of their difficulty level (and what difficulty level you tend to favor), let's move on to identifying your specific level.

First things first, though – let's get familiar with the level system of various music schools. Here's the basic information you need to know.

Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM)

This music school is the main one in Canada, so it's the one I'm most familiar with. You can also do RCM exams in the United States. There is a preparatory level, 10 grades, and a couple diploma levels beyond that (ABRSM and LRCM). The focus is on Classical music with modern selections.

One major strength of this schooling system lies in its extensive syllabus, with well over 100+ selections for each grade level, giving you plenty of material to explore.

Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM)

The ABRSM music school is available widely across the world, which I consider its main advantage over the other two schools.

There are 8 grades in the ABRSM (Grade 8 ABRSM roughly equates to Grade 10 RCM), and a few diploma levels past that point. Like the RCM, the focus is on Classical music with modern selections.

The ABRSM syllabus is quite narrow; there are only a handful of pieces to choose from at each level, though the pieces do change every few years.

Trinity College London (TCL)

Another widely available music school, though less popular than ABRSM. Tends to be more modern and contemporary. If you're interested in exploring pop/jazz styles exclusively, this is a school worth checking out. Trinity has grades 1-8 but doesn't have diploma levels.

How are these music schools relevant to you on your piano journey?

So why am I talking about music schools?

These music schools are the closest thing to a universal music curriculum we have as piano students. If you go to primary and secondary school in Canada, for example, there are nation-wide mandates and education

tends to be very consistent across the board. There's a set curriculum, so you can generally expect a Grade 8 student in Calgary and a Grade 8 student in Halifax to know the same things.

That's what music schools like the RCM set out to do. They provide a curriculum – a set of pieces for each level, technical requirements, theory, ear and sight-reading requirements – and it's up to the teacher to use this structure with their students (or not).

Music schools also provide students with the opportunity to take exams based on their level. For example, if you're studying pieces at a grade 6 level, you can then take a grade 6 exam and receive your grade 6 certificate.

Some people are put off by “school-ifying” their music experience, preferring to go with the flow. That's fine! But I find many students thrive with the structure these schools provide.

Whether or not you do exams is a personal choice. If someone asks, “what level of piano are you at?” it's helpful to be able to respond with, “I'm at a grade 6 level”. The plus side is, you don't need to do exams to say you're at a certain level (though the official paper is nice!). By the end of this module, you'll have a good answer to this question, regardless of if you take exams to formally receive grades.

It's also helpful for you, a motivated self-learner, to have a basic understanding of what each level of piano entails. What does it mean to be at a grade 1 level? A grade 6 level? These are questions we'll discuss at length in the coming weeks.

Determining your level

We're going to go back to your “**learning list sheets**” to determine your current level.

Medium-level pieces

First, let's look at all the pieces you marked as “medium difficulty”. These pieces will generally equate your current level.

For me, it includes pieces like Schubert's Moment Musicaux op. 94 no. 3, or Chopin's Waltz in C# minor. These are both Grade 9 level pieces, and it's where I feel the most comfortable.

Even though I've taken my grade 10 exam, I would still consider myself to be around a grade 9 level. All the grade 10 level pieces I've learned have felt like a significant stretch (my “challenging” pieces), whereas I can more easily conquer grade 9-level material.

Not all your “medium” pieces will be at the same level - average it out and go with your gut.

How to determine what level your pieces are at

Now I hear you saying, “Hold on, Allysia! How do I know what level my pieces are at?”

Method books

If you're using a method book, you can follow this as a rough guide:

Alfred's Adult 1/Piano Adventures Adult 1: Preparatory A (music kindergarten 1)

Alfred's Adult 2/Piano Adventures Adult 2: Preparatory B (music kindergarten 2)

Alfred's Adult 3/Piano Adventures 3a & 3b: Grade 1 & 2

Piano Adventures 4: Grade 3

John Thompson's Adult Piano Course, book 1: Preparatory A/B (music kindergarten 1 and 2)

John Thompson's Adult Piano Course, book 2: Grade 1 to 2

Individual pieces

If you're learning individual pieces, use the [RCM Syllabus](#), or the [RCM Piano Syllabus \(excel doc\)](#), to look up your pieces. Not every piece you learn will be in here, especially if they're more modern, but some should be.

Say you're learning a piece from Anne Crosby's book "In My Dreams". There are several pieces in the syllabus from this book between grades 1-3. Maybe the specific piece you learned isn't in the syllabus, but that's okay. You can assume the piece you learned will also be between grades 1-3 in difficulty.

If you can only determine the level of half (or less than half) of the pieces you've learned, that's okay. That's all you need to get started.

Go back to your chart where you listed the pieces you've worked on in the last 6 months to 1 year. As you determine the grade level of some of these pieces, [mark them in the far-right column](#).

Easy and difficult pieces

What about pieces you learned that you marked the difficulty of as "easy" or "difficult"?

Generally, the pieces you mark as "easy" are going to be a grade level or two below your actual level.

The pieces you mark as "difficult" are going to be a grade level or two above your actual level.

Some personal examples:

I have learned Liszt's *Liebestraum no. 3*. It's an ARCT level (one above Grade 10) and was borderline "very difficult" for me. This makes sense because I'm most comfortable around a grade 9 level.

I've also learned some of Bach's preludes, and these feel mostly easy to me (with a few as medium), which makes sense because they range in difficulty from around grade 7-9.

Beginner, Intermediate or Advanced?

Maybe you're having a tough time pinpointing an exact grade level you fall into – don't worry. We'll refine this as we go through the course.

For now, it's most important that you're able to put yourself in one of three categories: **Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced.**

Beginners are from a preparatory to a grade 2 level, intermediate is grade 3-7, and advanced is beyond grade 8. If you follow the ABRSM school, I'd shift these numbers a little - intermediate is grade 3-6 and advanced is grade 7 and up.

You might be able to refer to yourself as a "late beginner" or an "early intermediate" player. I would call myself "advanced". I'm past the "early advanced" stage, but I'm far from the "late advanced" stage of complex pieces.

Conclusion

It might take you several hours to finish the "level assessment sheet" if you learned a lot of pieces and you're looking them up in the syllabus one by one or trying to make educated guesses.

Despite being time-consuming, I encourage you to go through this process in full. Not only will it give you a better idea of your level, it'll also give you a better sense of what kind of music is appropriate for various levels.

Another resource you might find helpful, geared more toward intermediate and advanced students, is the **Henle level system**. Henle rates the difficulty level of famous Classical pieces between 1-9. Level 1 in Henle terms roughly equates with Grade 3 of RCM/ABRSM. Level 9 is extremely difficult, well beyond Grade 10.

Visit the [Henle website](#) to explore the different levels of various pieces in their catalogue.

Every time I buy a new book, I go through the Henle website, and if they're a part of Henle's collection, I mark in the levels of each piece.

I do the same thing with the RCM syllabus. I scour my new books for any pieces that appear in the RCM syllabus, and mark it directly into my book. It serves as a handy reference plan.