

Choosing a performance diploma

With the introduction of ABRSM's A.R.S.M. diploma, which aims to bridge the gap between Grade 8 and the Associate level diploma, and updated diplomas from Trinity and London College of Music, candidates now have greater choice and can select a diploma format which suits them

Before you begin, consider why you want to take a performance diploma

- For personal challenge
- For professional development
- To improve performance skills

Bear in mind that a performance diploma is a *professional* qualification and is not a simple step up from Grade 8. You should expect to take a minimum of 18 months to learn and finesse a programme for the Associate diploma, depending on your speed of learning and how much time you have to practice.

Your approach to the diploma, at whatever level, should be professional as far as possible.

There's a lot of snobbery surrounding the exam boards. But in terms of recognized academic accreditation, the Associate, Licentiate and Fellowship diplomas are identical across the main exam boards. The repertoire lists for the exam boards confirm this.

So rather than thinking that one diploma is "better" or "more difficult" than another, select a format which you feel will suit you best and will enable you to demonstrate your strengths.

If you are keen to improve your performing skills, I would suggest the Trinity diplomas or LCM's new Concert diploma.

Ultimately, it's about selecting a format which will suit you as a musician and for which you will enjoy preparing.

Finally, check the regulations *very carefully* long before you submit an entry. Make sure you meet the entry criteria – the ABRSM and LCM diplomas, for example, require a pass at Grade 8.

Selecting a programme

Because a performance diploma is just that – a performance – think carefully about the repertoire and organization of a programme. Don't select music because you think it will impress the examiner, but rather choose music that will allow you to play to your strengths. And, importantly, music which you will enjoy learning.

There is no requirement to create a chronological programme – Baroque, Romantic, Modern etc. Instead, you should aim to create a programme which demonstrates a variety of styles, tempi and moods, but you could easily create a programme entirely of 20th and 21st century music which incorporates these elements.

If you are including own-choice repertoire, check the exam board's regulations regarding this and seek approval, if required, in plenty of time.

Stagecraft and presentation skills

A performance diploma is a professional qualification and you should take a professional attitude to all your preparation, not just practising your repertoire.

Stagecraft and presentation skills include:

- Accurate timing of your programme (for the individual pieces and the entire programme. An overlong, or too short programme will result in deduction of marks or even disqualification).
- Programme notes – well-written and neatly presented on good-quality paper
- What you wear – dress as if for an afternoon or early evening performance
- How you behave in the recital room and during the performance

Ensuring these aspects are well-covered can allow you to pick up extra “easy marks” on top of the main performance and could be the difference between a pass or a pass with Distinction

Always check the exam board's regulations very carefully to make sure you are totally familiar with all the requirements

If you are unsure about how professional performers comport themselves on stage, go to a few concerts and watch how they do it. You can learn a lot by observing others in performance.

Good stagecraft and presentation can really enhance your confidence and get you into the mindset for a slick, professional performance.

Frances Wilson © June 2019