

# DIPLOMA DAY 2021

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### WHY TAKE A PERFORMANCE DIPLOMA?

Grade 8 does not represent the pinnacle of learning and a Diploma is the logical next step for a competent musician who wishes to improve and develop their musicianship, musicality and performance skills.

Anyone who thinks a diploma is a simple step up from Grade 8, think again. A diploma, even at the lowest level, is significantly more involved, requiring a high degree of attainment, combined with a professional attitude to preparation, communication, musicality, presentation and stagecraft. The diploma itself is a *professional qualification* recognised by other musicians and music professionals around the world.

Music diplomas also offer the chance to study without restrictions on length of study or the requirement that one is taught in an institution. You can therefore prepare for and take a diploma *in your own time*.

There are many requirements to be considered, and met, when taking a music Diploma, and the rigour of the exam is reflected in the expected learning outcomes and assessment objectives. For example, unlike in the grade exams, at Diploma level you select your own repertoire (either from the broad syllabus or by submitting an own-choice programme for approval). The choice of repertoire is wide, and from it you must put together a programme that demonstrates a wide variety of musical styles, moods, tempi and technical challenges. In the exam, you are assessed not only on your ability to meet the criteria as set out in the exam board's regulations, but also on choice of repertoire, programme planning and balance, stagecraft, written programme notes, and, where applicable a *viva voce*.

The benefits of taking a performance diploma are broad, and include:

- A deeper understanding of musical structure, “architecture”, harmony, narrative
- The composer's creative vision and individual soundworld, and how to interpret it
- A personal and authoritative interpretative standpoint based on solid background research, and an understanding of historical and social contexts
- Vastly improved technical facility and general musicianship
- An understanding of performance practice
- Learning how to be a performer: to project and communicate the composer's intentions to a high level, and to perform with original creative flair
- Drawing on one's own personal experiences (not necessarily musical ones) in individual performances
- Developing a mature musical and artistic personality

Think carefully about exactly why you want to take a diploma and be wary of the desire for external credentialization through letters after your name. You may wish to take a diploma to enhance your teaching profile – and there is a lot to be gained from a teaching point of view in taking a performance rather than a teaching diploma. Ultimately, the reasons for taking a diploma should be about one's personal musical development, working towards a personal goal and, above all, self-fulfilment.

On another level, they offer the satisfaction of achieving a personal goal.

## CHOOSING A DIPLOMA SYLLABUS

With the introduction of ABRSM's ARSM diploma, which aims to bridge the gap between Grade 8 and the Associate level diploma, and updated diplomas from Trinity College London (TCL) and London College of Music (LCM), candidates now have far greater choice and can select a diploma format which suits them best.

Before you begin, consider exactly *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, from your practicing to your performance, should be professional as far as possible.

There's a lot of snobbery surrounding the exam boards, with the ABRSM regarded by many as "the Gold Standard". But in terms of recognized academic accreditation, the Associate, Licentiate and Fellowship diplomas are identical across the main exam boards (ABRSM, TCL, LCM) and 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, consider TCL's diplomas or LCM's 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.

One other point to consider is entry fees. Currently ABRSM's diplomas are the most expensive, with the DipABRSM entry fee currently at £270 and LRSM at £599 compared to TCL's fees £236 and £332 respectively.

ABRSM Performance Diplomas [ABRSM: Music Performance](#)

TCL Performance Diplomas [Performance diplomas | Trinity College London](#)

LCM Performance Diplomas [Music Diplomas syllabus \(from 2019\) \(uwl.ac.uk\)](#)

### *Other options*

MTB Exams offer online only submission for Associate and Licentiate level diplomas which some candidates may find less stressful than a live recital. Candidates can submit a recital at any time. Like the three main exam boards, MTB Exams are regulated and accredited by Ofqual. More information [About Performance Diplomas - MTB Exams](#)

## SELECTING A PROGRAMME

Because a Performance Diploma is just that – a *performance* – think carefully about the repertoire and organisation of your programme and treat it like a concert rather than an exam. Think about how pieces will fit together as if in a public recital to create interest and variety for the audience.

There is no requirement to create a chronological programme – Baroque, Romantic, Modern etc. 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 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century music which incorporates all of these elements.

Don't select music simply because you think it will impress the examiner (and bear in mind that examiners can have rather entrenched views about certain pieces and composers, for example, Chopin's Etudes or Beethoven's Piano Sonatas), but rather choose music that will allow you to play to your strengths. And, importantly, music which you will enjoy learning and playing.

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

Platforms like Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube are useful in planning a programme as you can create playlists of your repertoire and play around with the ordering of pieces to hear how the programme might work as a whole. This will also give you an idea of the approximate timing of your programme.

### *Sample ATCL programme:*

Bach – Toccata from Partita No. 6 in E minor  
Messiaen – Regard de la Vierge, from Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jesus  
Schubert – Impromptu in E flat, D 899, No. 3  
Liszt – Sonetto 123 del Petrarca from Annees de pelerinage, deuxieme annee: Italie  
Szymanowski – Mazurkas Nos. 1 and 2

### *Sample LTCL programme:*

Bach – Keyboard Concerto after Marcello, BWV 974  
Takemitsu – Rain Tree Sketch II  
Mozart – Rondo in A minor, K511  
Liszt – Sonetto 104 del Petrarca from Annees de pelerinage, deuxieme annee: Italie  
Rachmaninov – Etudes Tableaux in E flat and G minor, Op 33

### *Sample FTCL programme:*

Britten – Night Piece  
Schubert – Sonata in A, D959

## PROGRAMME NOTES

Programme notes are typically provided to concert-goers to give information about the background of the pieces being performed; any important stylistic contributions of the piece; and to allow listeners to follow descriptions of the music during the performance (e.g. number of movements).

If you go to concerts regularly, you will be familiar with the content of programme notes and you should use this as a basis for your own notes.

When writing programme notes, avoid irrelevant information, for example general information about the composer's life and style, and flowery or overly technical language. Instead, you should include specific information relating to the piece (date of composition, structure/organisation etc); any important stylistic contributions of the piece without using bar numbers or being too technical; any particularly interesting or unusual features in the piece; a brief description of the music.

DipABRSM - General concert audience 1100 words ( $\pm 10\%$ )

LRSM - More musically informed audience 1800 words ( $\pm 10\%$ )

ABRSM Guide to Writing Programme notes <https://gb.abrsm.org/media/62446/writingprognotesapr05.pdf>

Because ABRSM's diplomas include a viva voce/spoken element in which you will be asked about your programme, ensure that you are familiar with your programme notes and more technical aspects of your pieces so that you are able to discuss them with authority and fluency.

ABRM's lower ARSM diploma is **performance only** and has no written or spoken content

TCL has now dropped the requirement to include detailed written programme notes at ATCL and LTCL level. Instead, candidates should supply:

- Name of the candidate
- Date, place and time of the recital
- Composers, full titles and opus numbers (where available) of all the works to be played, in order of performance
- An accurate timing for each piece, and for the entire programme

The programme should be presented in the form of an A5 size booklet. For digital diplomas, candidates can supply an A4 programme.

At FTCL, candidates are required to include detailed programme notes of 1200-1600 words in length. Further information about programme notes for TCL diplomas can be found here [Approaching Music Performance Diplomas – Written Programme for ATCL and LTCL | Trinity College London](#)

LCM's new Concert diploma has no written or spoken requirement, but their standard ALCM, DipLCM, and LLCM performance diplomas include a written element and also sight-reading, while their Recital diplomas includes discussion OR sight-reading. The FLCM is a performance plus programme notes format.

Programme notes for LCM diplomas should follow the format as described for ABRSM diplomas

ALCM – brief programme notes detailing the music performed

DipLCM - c1000 words

LLCM – c2000 words

FLCM - 3000 to 3500 words

Full details of all requirements can be found on the LCM Diploma Syllabus [Music Diplomas syllabus \(from 2019\) \(uwl.ac.uk\)](#)

## PRESENTATION SKILLS & PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

As mentioned previously, a performance diploma is a professional qualification and therefore your approach should be professional. This includes presentation skills and stagecraft on the day of the recital:

**Dress appropriately** – TCL’s diploma regulations state that you should dress as if “for an afternoon or early evening recital”. Choose clothing that is not only appropriate for the occasion but also – and importantly – *comfortable*. Try out your concert attire ahead of the recital to ensure you are comfortable with it.

**Stagecraft** – this is not only your ability to walk to the piano without tripping over (!) but also how you comport yourself from the moment you enter the exam room. In some instances, you may be lucky enough to perform in a proper concert setting, e.g. the Peacock Room at Trinity-Laban in Greenwich, but regardless of the setting, approach the recital as if you are performing at a venue like the Wigmore Hall. Greet the examiner/s politely, go to the piano, sit and check the stool is the correct height and adjust if necessary. Stow your music neatly or ask your page-turner to look after it (if applicable). In some instances, you are permitted a brief warm up on the instrument; if not, allow yourself a few moments to focus and centre yourself. Do not speak between the pieces. At the end of your recital, stand and bow. Collect your music and leave the exam room.

This attitude and behaviour also apply if you are making an online diploma submission. Additionally, ensure that you piano and surrounding space are tidy and distraction-free – i.e. no piles or music, photos or other ornaments on the piano. If you are playing a grand piano, have the lid open fully or on half-stick, and ensure that when filming the instrument and you are fully visible to the viewer.

**Performance anxiety** – this can be a significant issue for many adult amateur pianists, especially those who have had little or no performance experience prior to taking a diploma.

The first and most important point to note is that anxiety is *completely normal*, and reminding yourself of this can play a part in alleviating your anxiety.

We may each have our own particular ways to manage anxiety, from physical exercises drawn from yoga or Pilates to power poses, or mental preparation such as thinking yourself into a positive mindset through positive affirmation such as is used in cognitive behaviour therapy or neuro-linguistic programming. But the most significant factor in managing anxiety is knowing you are **well prepared for the recital**.

So, just as you practice your pieces, you should also practice performing them and practice your performance anxiety management routine. Take every opportunity available to perform some or all of your programme to other people, from performance platforms at piano clubs like LPMG to courses and masterclasses. Organise your own recital in your home and ask a few friends round, or give a concert in a local church or rehearsal space such as the 1901 Arts Club or Peregrine’s Pianos in London. Use every opportunity to perform as a chance to reflect on your preparation and management of your anxiety, and make adjustments as necessary.

## A PERFORMANCE DIPLOMA CHECKLIST

Preparation is everything!

A performance diploma at whatever level is a *professional* qualification, and one should therefore treat all aspects of the preparation and actual performance in a professional manner. As an adult amateur pianist, you may not have had much performance experience beyond grade exams or playing at a piano club, but you can also do plenty of your own work to better understand what goes into a public performance beyond the music; for example, observing professional musicians at work in concerts and in other settings to understand and appreciate all the aspects which go into presenting a professional performance, including programme planning and programme notes, stage deportment, attire, and one's demeanour and presence at the instrument.

Here are some practical suggestions in the lead up to your diploma recital:

### **At least a month ahead of your diploma recital....**

- With the exam recital only a month away, your programme should be learnt, secure and finessed
- Get into the habit of playing through the entire programme regularly (at least twice a week), without stopping to correct mistakes, and with appropriate pauses between works. This helps build stamina and allows you to experience the flow and energy of the individual pieces and how they work together in the programme as a whole.
- If using a page turner, have several rehearsals with the page turner and ensure your turner is clear about repeats, DCs etc. Make sure your page turner turns discreetly and removes and replaces the scores as quietly and discreetly as possible. If you are using the score without a turner, photocopy pages to avoid awkward page turns and include these in your score so you get used to seeing them/the sequencing of pages etc.
- If you intend to use an iPad or tablet instead of paper scores, check that that exam board will permit this. Make sure any additional technology such as a bluetooth page turning device is working properly.
- Record the programme to check for timings, of the entire programme and individual pieces. You will need to include this information in your programme notes (for each piece and the overall programme). Be as accurate as possible, as marks may be deducted if your timings are incorrect or your programme is outside of the allotted time limit.
- Try and perform the entire programme at least three times ahead of your diploma recital, in different settings. Get a bunch of friends round and perform to them, organise a concert in a local church or arts centre, or hire a rehearsal room and play there with a few friends/colleagues in attendance. This helps manage anxiety and also allows you to really project the music to others. Also good for practising presentation skills such as walking to the piano, body language, presence etc., and page turns (if playing from the score). Interesting things can occur in run-through performances and may highlight weak spots in your music which you can then make absolutely secure in your practising, or reveal aspects in the music which you feel need additional emphasis or expression.
- Choose your outfit for the diploma recital and practise playing in it to ensure it is comfortable. Clothing should be appropriate for a "lunchtime or early evening recital", so formal but not evening dress. Remember you will be marked on your attire as part of the 'presentation skills' element of the diploma. This also applies if you are submitting your diploma programme online.
- Try and play a variety of different pianos, particularly grand pianos, to get a feel for different instruments. It is easy to hire a rehearsal space or use a piano in a church.
- Write your programme notes and have them checked/proofread by someone else. Use a clear typeface with no fancy decorative elements, photographs or biography. Print the programme on good-quality paper or lightweight card.

### **A couple of weeks before the recital....**

- Make sure you know where you are going to take the diploma and plan a route which will allow you to arrive in good time to warm up and settle ahead of the performance.
- Photocopy your music and put it in a folder with the printed programme to hand to the examiner at the diploma recital. If you are including own-choice repertoire, include a copy of the approval letter from the exam board (this is applicable to Trinity diplomas) with the copies of your music.
- By this point your practising should really just be maintenance, but don't get complacent. Practise intelligently and listen *all the time*. Record yourself, reflect, adjust.
- If you have been working on the repertoire for a long time, try and recall why you chose it in the first place and what you like about it. Maybe even write some notes about it. This can help "refresh" the music if you feel it is becoming a little tired and enables you to create a vivid "story" of the music when you come to perform it.

### **The day before the recital....**

- Check you have all your music, and photocopies of music, etc in a folder ready to hand to the examiner at the start of the recital.
- Check your clothing
- Do very light or little practise.
- Try to keep body and brain rested (take a day or afternoon off work if necessary and do as little as possible)

### **On the day of the recital....**

- Arrive at the exam venue in good time to warm up and then focus on the task ahead. If you have a special routine to alleviate anxiety, go through your routine.
- Practise self-affirmation – "I am well-prepared", "I can do it!", etc. Turn "I'm nervous" into "I'm excited to share my music with others"
- When you go into the exam room, greet the examiner/s politely and give them your programme notes etc.
- Treat the recital like a professional public performance and do not speak to the examiners between pieces.
- Stow your music neatly on the piano or ask your page turner to look after it
- At the end of the performance stand and bow.

### **After the recital....**

- Try not to post-mortem your performance too much or dwell on things you weren't happy with. Instead focus on the positives and then go and have a large glass of wine, or three....!
- The day after the performance you may feel very tired and moody, with almost flu-like symptoms. This is a side effect of adrenaline and other stress hormones settling back to their normal levels. Allow yourself time to recover, but the best cure for the post-performance depression can actually be playing music – not your diploma repertoire but music you simply enjoy.

**GOOD LUCK!!**

## RESOURCES AND LINKS

**The Musician's Way** – blog and book by Gerald Klickstein. An excellent resource full of advice on performance preparation including the psychology of performance, planning a programme, practicing, stagecraft etc [Become a Successful Musician! \(musiciansway.com\)](http://musiciansway.com)

**The Inner Game of Music** – Barry Green with Tim Gallwey [The Inner Game of Music - The Inner Game](#)

**The Perfect Wrong Note** – William Westney

**Music from the Inside Out** – Charlotte Tomlinson

**The Complete Pianist** – Penelope Roskell. Highly detailed book with videos on technique, artistry, performance and more. Plus additional videos on YouTube.

**Practising the Piano / Practising the Piano Online Academy** – Graham Fitch's extensive resource for pianists with articles and videos on all aspects of piano playing, including repertoire "walk-throughs", technique, exercises etc.

**The Cross-Eyed Pianist** – blog on classical music and piano playing by Frances Wilson. Frances charted her own preparation for her performance diplomas in a series of articles which are a useful resource for those who are considering a performance diploma. Frances also offers a consultation service including selection a diploma, planning a programme, writing programme notes and presentation skills.

## LINKS to diploma information by exam board

ABRSM

[ABRSM: Diplomas](#)

TCL

[Performance diplomas | Trinity College London](#)

Syllabus and regulations, plus videos and other useful resources to help you prepare for your diploma

LCM

[Performance Diplomas - University of West London \(uwl.ac.uk\)](#)

MTB exams

[About Performance Diplomas - MTB Exams](#)