

Taking Root

ABRSM sets out its mission as inspiring musical achievement. But what does the music of ABRSM look, feel and sound like, and where does it come from?



Philippa Bunting and Lincoln Abbotts – two musicians working at the heart of the organisation – provide an insight and invite us all to join in.

ABRSM is one of the UK's largest music education organisations, as well as a significant commissioner and publisher of music. At its core is a commitment to musical excellence in all its many forms. We believe in music's ability to inspire and to transform, and in its potential as a vehicle for personal development and expression.

The same conviction is central to Ben Okri's words:

*Tomorrow's music sleeps In our fingers,
In our awakening souls, The blossom of our spirit,
The suggestive buds of our hearts.
Tell everyone the idea is to function together As good musicians would
In undefined future orchestras.*

Ben Okri, excerpt from Lines In Potentis, 2002



It is a core belief of ABRSM that the music we choose for candidates to play in our exams should be engaging, imaginative and viscerally satisfying to play. If teachers and learners are going to invest time and effort in studying a piece, it needs to reward beyond itself, and to resonate with the wider world of music as a whole. Beyond that we want to inspire a sense of curiosity, exploration, a playful engagement that goes way beyond the dots on the page. We all know as teachers those pieces that are so well written for the instrument that they are, in and of themselves, an education in how to play it. Those that capture in 'We believe in music's ability to inspire and to transform' miniature the larger, symphonic gestures, introducing a subtle understanding of harmonic nuance, details of articulation and interaction between parts. Those that invoke moods that resonate with the learner – joyful, reflective, anarchic, furious, mournful, proud – and allow them to communicate directly with the listener.

These same themes flow into the music-making we support through our portfolio of global partnerships. The work we champion with grassroots initiatives across the globe, as well as with many of the national youth ensembles in the UK, has ambitious music-making at its heart, bringing influences, people and musics together. It really is about developing an appetite for curiosity – in particular about how musics beyond our own work.

But back to ABRSM and the choice of music for our exams. We have said a bit about our overarching motives for choosing some pieces over others, but what of the means by which we go about making those choices? And who makes them?

An ideal selector for an ABRSM syllabus would be a first-class performer with: a teaching profile that extends from the group teaching of beginners to conservatoire level; a wide and eclectic taste in music; a voracious appetite for seeking out the new and exciting, balanced with a thorough knowledge of the pedagogical canon; a high level of organisational and technological competence; storage space sufficient to house the vast amount of music which publishers will share with them; a keen eye for musical detail; a wide range of contacts with whom to discuss and hone ideas; an understanding of the types of music likely to appeal to teachers and learners across more than 90 countries ... and a good sense of humour.

Unfortunately, those don't grow on trees. So instead, we adopt a broad-based collaborative approach. A number of selectors, with different experience profiles, first set about evaluating and choosing repertoire, seeking to create a good mix between core

Music is about people, and a core purpose of our partnership work is to bring people together. For example, we work with the National Youth Orchestra's Inspire programme – a side-by-side experience for aspirational future members. Our Shine event, staged in 2017 at the Barbican saw hundreds of performers on stage playing everything from saxophones to shopping trolleys in a newly commissioned work by Mark Armstrong, artistic director of NYJO, jazz professor at RCM and ABRSM examiner. You can download the free Shine score and resources at www.abrsm.org/shine

Our most recent partnership with The Third Orchestra, and its hopeful follow-up of a youth ensemble, offers another musical perspective – an orchestra without boundaries, with players from all over the world drawing from a wealth of global musical traditions and languages. More than classical meets jazz, or east meets west, this orchestra is about each individual bringing their unique heritage and lineage into the work while simultaneously representing all they know, and in doing so creating a fresh new music.

repertoire, hidden gems, pedagogical 'must-haves' and the latest available repertoire. For instruments such as the piano, this task can be almost overwhelming, given the huge amount of music published each year – hence the value of working in selecting teams, where mutual support is readily available.

Many checks and balances are applied, but the most important thing is to choose music that will provide an enriching learning experience, sparking musical imagination; music that has integrity; and music that is amenable for assessment. And, perhaps surprisingly, there aren't many trees those grow on either. While we can be certain that 130 years from now will see us in the year 2149, we can't accurately predict what the soundtrack to those times will be. Musics are likely, however, to become ever more equal, with listeners and learners gliding seamlessly and effortlessly across genres, broadcast channels and live experiences. The musical branches of ABRSM are already spreading in anticipation. With our roots planted deep, we know that 'The most important thing is to choose music that will provide an enriching learning experience' excellence in ever more musical forms will continue to shine through.