

What is a Graded Exam?

Here in the UK, a number of examination boards have set up Graded Exams in all the common musical instruments, including Classical Guitar.

As an adult reading this, you might well be wondering what one is.

Well, it's not like a driving test. There are 8 main levels, not one single standard; and although you can fail, just as you can fail a driving test, if you do fail, you don't have to be accompanied by a "proper guitarist" each time you take your guitar out for a spin!

But let's talk about passing, not failing!

- Do I need to pass a Graded Exam?

Not unless music is going to be your career

- So what's in it for me?

As an adult, not necessarily anything. But some students love a goal, and they love proof they've attained it

- What will I gain, doing an exam, that I won't gain just with lessons?

A focus on perfection, rather than progress.

A chance to play to someone else (most teachers, like me, provide dozens of other chances to play to someone else!)

Types of Grade

There are three types of Graded Exam provided by most examination boards....

- Practical - show you have mastered your instrument
- Theory - show you understand how music works
- Musicianship - show you can apply musical techniques on the fly

In a broad brush summary, Practical is the one that interests Classical musicians, and Musicianship interests those with a Jazz leaning.

The theory, by contrast, is a desk-based exam. It's entirely optional in the lower grades, but to be able to enter a Practical exam above Grade 5, you need to demonstrate that you understand Theory at Grade 5 level.

What are the Grades?

Most exam boards have 8 Grades, and for an adult, a Grade is about the amount of progress one makes in a year if one is keen and dedicated.

It's possible to do the Grades faster, but doing exams end-to-end is a blinkered and poor way to master the Guitar. I'd rather play a thousand fun pieces than just three difficult ones, and I'm sure you would too!

What does a Practical exam consist of?

It's a short visit to an exam centre, just 15 minutes at the lower Grades!

- You'll play 3 pieces you've chosen from a set-list and prepared over the previous 3-6 months
- You'll play the examiner's choice of some scales and arpeggios on the set-list which you need to have memorised
- You'll do a piece of sight-reading to show that you don't just play guitar parrot-fashion
- You'll listen to some snippets of music played on a piano and answer questions on what you've heard
- And some time later you'll receive your marks and a report

If someone wants to do exams with me, I teach to the Associated Board syllabus, as I like their emphasis on musicality and not just technique...

- If a player is musical, they'll hear and repair technical problems.
- If a player is just a technician, they'll manage the notes, but miss the music

Associated Board have a website at www.abrsm.org