

Free Choice Pieces

Guide to selecting pieces and studies of a suitable standard

Bowed Strings (Violin, Viola & Cello)

The expected technical difficulty of pieces and studies for Free Choice Repertoire will align to the general requirements of the technical exercises for each grade. Teachers wishing to select suitable Free Choice pieces and studies should therefore look at our technical exercises for each instrument at each grade to establish whether pieces reflect the range of technical demands demonstrated by the exercises. Pieces and studies which are significantly easier (technically) than the technical exercises would not be suitable.

The scale requirements for each grade demonstrate the 'range' and 'keys' that would be suitable per grade. Pieces which do not cover a large part of this range (in particular the extremes) would be unlikely to be suitable Free Choice Pieces.

The range of rhythms suitable for each grade can be judged by viewing the 'Reading Skills' on the MTB Exams syllabuses (additional resources pages). Pieces or studies should demonstrate a rhythmic complexity equivalent to the Reading skills for that grade. The rhythms do not necessarily have to be the same but should demonstrate equivalent complexity.

An outline of the appropriate technical and expressive expectations at each grade are listed below. Pieces would not be expected to include all of these but should include a selection of them. If you are unsure whether your free choice pieces or studies meet our criteria, we recommend that you use our optional Approval Service. This service requires you to provide an image of the music along with the following information: instrument, grade, title, composer and the book in which it is published, if applicable, along with a short description of why you believe it meets the required standard. We are currently offering this service for free.

Entry Level - Pre Grades

Technical expectations

- Pre Grade Introductory: four strings established along with one left-hand (LH) tetrachord shape. Use of *pizzicato* and basic *arco*. Understanding of semibreves, minims, crotchets, quavers and tied notes. Basic ability to cross strings and play a limited variety of rhythms.
- Pre Grade Higher: Facility across all four strings developed along with basic slurs. Two LH tetrachord shapes. One-octave major scale facility across two strings. Some understanding of bow control via symmetrical patterns. A wider repertoire of rhythm patterns than that required for Pre Grade Introductory.

Pieces at this level will include elements of the above and be very basic and short in length. (often approx. 8-16 bars). At Pre Grade Introductory a fully focused sound/quality of intonation is not expected but by Pre Grade Higher, players will be expected to display a very basic focused sound and developing definition of intonation plus an ability to play fluently at a steady tempo with a basic sense of line.

Musicality/expression, expectations: There is very basic expectation of expression at this level. Avoidance of musical awkwardness is sufficient. Awkwardness may include forcing the tone too much making it ugly or too little tone meaning it sounds uncertain or lacking in conviction or unwanted unevenness of volume or tone. The use of dynamic contrast will enhance a performance but will not be expected in order to pass at this level.

Level 1 – Grades 1-3

Technical expectations

- Grade 1: Basic fluency on all four strings and two LH tetrachord shapes. A two-octave major scale in first position. Basic ability in the minor mode. Ability to play basic scalar passages at a faster tempo, ability to include basic slurs. Comfortable with rhythmic patterns utilising basic note values at a variety of tempi.
- Grade 2: Further LH tetrachord shapes in first position, elementary shifting introduced, more varied slurred patterns. Extended knowledge of keys or accidentals up to 2 sharps or flats. Comfortable with rhythmic patterns utilising basic note values and dotted notes at a variety of tempi.
- Grade 3: Extended knowledge of keys or accidentals up to 3 sharps and flats, a wider range of bowing and slurring patterns, to play basic chromatic note groups, development of more complex and varied fingering and articulation patterns in a variety of keys, display increased dynamic control and ability to play faster than in earlier grades. Introduction/development of some work in positions $\frac{1}{2}$, 2nd, 3rd, 4th. Comfortable with rhythmic patterns utilising compound time signatures at a variety of tempi.

Pieces at this level will include elements of the above at each grade and will be basic and relatively short in length (often approx. 16-32 bars). Players will be expected to display a clear focused sound and clear articulation including attention to some subtlety of articulation including staccato, tenuto and accents for example. They should show the ability to play fluently at an appropriate tempo with a developing sense of shape and line. Pieces will, typically use some position shifts though not necessarily using all the neck positions. Players should also display a good basic level of bow control, stamina and dynamic range.

Musicality/expression, expectations: There is basic expectation of expression at this level. Performances should avoid musical awkwardness such as inappropriate emphasis of notes or uneven bowing which distorts the phrasing or line. More detailed dynamic contrast such

as crescendo and diminuendo etc. is appropriate by grade 3 and will enhance a performance but will not be expected in order to pass at this level. Similarly, performances should display an awareness of articulation and phrasing at this level. Although performances should show an increasing awareness of articulation moving from grades 1-3 such as the use of staccato, tenuto and accents, more detailed use of these will enhance a performance but will not be expected in order to pass at this level.

Level 2 – Grades 4-5

Technical expectations

- Grade 4: Reasonably fluent use of all the neck positions and some 5th position. Knowledge of keys or accidentals with multiple flats and sharps and the performance of more complex minor scale patterns, development of more chromatic fingering patterns and longer/faster passages of music. Comfortable with rhythmic patterns including utilising dotted quaver rhythms at a variety of tempi. Facility in more intricate bowing patterns and string crossings.
- Grade 5: Fluent, accurate use of the neck positions and up to 6th position. Depending on teacher approach some work in basic thumb position. Knowledge of a wide range of keys with multiple flats and sharps and the fluent performance of either harmonic or melodic minor scale patterns, chromatic passages which might employ diminished 7th patterns and irregular chromatic patterns. Display a developing range of technical ability beyond that of grade 4 through the technical exercises for this grade. Elements of double stopping and more accurate string crossing technique. Comfortable with rhythmic patterns including utilising a variety of semi-quaver patterns at a variety of tempi.

Pieces at this level will include elements of the above at each grade and will be straightforward and of moderate length (often approx. 32-64 bars). Players will be expected to display a strong, clearly focused sound at all dynamics and clear articulation. They should show the ability to play fluently, in tune and at an appropriate tempo with an established sense of shape and line. Players should also display a good level of bow control, stamina, and dynamic range. There should be attention to a range of tonal colours.

Musicality/expression, expectations: There is an expectation of a developing degree of expression at this level. Performances should include use of straightforward dynamic contrast including piano or pianissimo/forte or fortissimo/crescendo/diminuendo/rallentando/accelerando etc. More detailed dynamic contrast such as staccato accents/semi staccato and a detailed understanding of phrasing etc. will enhance a performance but will not be expected to be fully displayed to pass at this level. Elements of rubato might well be present but polished execution will not be a requirement to pass at this level.

Level 3 – Grades 6-8

Technical expectations

- Grade 6: reasonable fluency will be expected throughout the lower three octave compass of the instrument. Knowledge of keys or accidentals with multiple flats and sharps and the performance of harmonic minor, melodic minor and whole tone scale patterns. Technical expertise will need to be demonstrated in a range of techniques involving more demanding aural dimensions and more subtle control of bowing whilst executing increasingly demanding LH tasks. Bow control will now show deeper understanding and expressive potential and LH finger technique will show genuine dexterity and accuracy. Expressive demands will be higher than before and more familiarity of musical terms beyond those in English and Italian. Increasingly comfortable with technical challenges at both ends of the tempo spectrum.
- Grade 7: fluency will be expected throughout a higher three octave compass of the instrument. Knowledge of keys or accidentals with multiple flats and sharps and the performance of harmonic minor, melodic minor and whole tone scale patterns. Technical expertise will need to be demonstrated in an increasing range of techniques (possibly including 'extended techniques') involving more demanding aural dimensions and more subtle control of bowing whilst executing increasingly demanding LH tasks. Bow control will now show understanding and expressive capacity and LH finger technique will show genuine dexterity and accuracy. Expressive demands will be higher than before and more familiarity of musical terms beyond those in English and Italian. Increasingly comfortable with technical challenges at both extremes of the tempo spectrum.
- Grade 8: fluency will be expected throughout the full three octave compass of the instrument and include some familiarity with the fourth octave. Knowledge of keys or accidentals with multiple flats and sharps and the performance of harmonic minor, melodic minor and whole tone scale patterns. Technical expertise will need to be demonstrated in an increasing range of techniques (possibly including 'extended techniques') involving more demanding aural dimensions and more subtle control of bowing whilst executing increasingly demanding LH tasks. Technical proficiency will transcend that of earlier grades. Bow control will now show understanding and expression and LH finger technique will show genuine dexterity and considerable accuracy. Expressive demands will be higher than before and more familiarity of musical terms in a range of languages. Increasingly comfortable with technical challenges at both extremes of the tempo spectrum.

Pieces at this level will include elements of the above at each grade and will be complex and full-length concert items often 1 to 2 pages or more in length (including movements from Sonatas and Concertos). Players will be expected to display a strong, clear, focused, refined and nuanced sound at all dynamics and in all ranges with a variety of tone colours as appropriate to the demands of the music (solemn, fanfare, majestic, jazzy, lyrical etc) and clear articulation including paying detailed attention to the subtlety of articulation including

staccato, tenuto and a variety of accents within complex passages including intricate string crossings, complex bowing patterns and demanding LH work. They should show the ability to play fluently and in tune in all registers and at an appropriate tempo with a detailed sense of shape and line. Players should also display a high level of bow control, stamina, and dynamic range. There should be expressive use of a range of tonal colours.

Musicality/expression, expectations: There is an expectation of a high degree of expression at this level. Performances should include full use of dynamic contrast and changes of tempo including an informed use of rubato. More detailed understanding of musical form, phrase structure etc. will enhance a performance and there is an expectation of an understanding of the complex stylistic demands of music such as baroque/jazz etc.