

Grade 1 Aural – Tips on practicing skills at home to tackle the tests

The aural tests in exam grades are often the areas that students find the most daunting or confusing to do. With a bit of practice, and knowledge of what the examiner is looking for students can often do really well in this part of the exam, it also makes you a better and more confident musician.

After having a go at some of the exercises listed here why not download the ABRSM aural app for your phone or tablet which will allow you to practice the tests, or search on YouTube for practice tests.

Next we will look at each part of the test and break down what the examiner wants you to do, making sure you are happy with all the terms involved and ways of breaking down the skills into little exercises to practice.

A.) Clap a pulse of a piece played by the examiner, and to identify whether it is in two time or three time.

What does it mean? and how can I practice it?

The pulse is like the steady musical heartbeat that is regular and does not change, to make sure you are happy with the difference between pulse and rhythm, clap a steady beat whilst saying “tea, coffee, tea, coffee” repeatedly.

Here you are saying the rhythm (changes) and clapping the pulse.

To identify two time or three time, you need to think about pieces you might have played. Music in 3 times feels like a dance like a Waltz (if you watch strictly like me!). Two time will feel more like a march. Have a listen to some pieces on the radio or online and see if you can identify whether it's in two or three time.

The final bit here which is not in the question but you have to do is clap the strong beat louder below I have shown the strong beats (louder claps) in bold.

Two time – **1**,2,**1**,2,**1**,2

Three Time – **1**,2,3,**1**,2,3,**1**,2,3

It's worth practicing just clapping and making sure you are getting the strong beat clearly louder, as it will help you feel the different feel of two time and three time and easily identify it.

B. Sing as echoes 3 phrases played by the examiner in a major Key

But I don't sing... is this biggest reaction when this part of the test is introduced. This part is the bit where most students feel very un-confident. With a little understanding and practice let's see if we can start feeling more confident with the singing.

What does it mean, and how can I practice it?

Singing in a major key is just like playing in the major key or playing a major scale. For this grade the test will be limited to the first 3 notes of the major scale. This gives us a really easy way to practice it, at first play the first 3 notes of the major scale for your exam, and then immediately after you stop playing sing them! When you get more confident you could mix up the order such as CDE, DEC, CEC.

There are two intervals (gaps between the notes) that can appear with the grade 1 notes these are called a tone and a major 3rd. If we can hear and sing these intervals it means that we will be confident when it comes to singing the echoes.

The best way to learn how to hear and sing these intervals is by singing familiar songs which have them in below I have listed a song for each interval going up and down which will help you.

Major 2nd (going up) - In The Sound of Music. Think of Julie Andrews singing "Do-Re-Mi" to the children. In the line "doe a deer," the interval between "doe" and "a" is an ascending Major 2nd. Another option to think of is the first interval in "Frere Jacques."

Major 2nd (going down) - In "Mary Had a Little Lamb," the interval in the word "Mary" is a descending Major 2nd. It is also the first interval in "Three Blind Mice."

Major 3rd (going up) - Get into the holiday spirit, think of the first two notes of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

Major 3rd (Descending) - Moving from Christmas to the Gershwin's hit "Summertime," the first two notes (in between "sum" and "mer") will give you a Major 3rd. An alternative to remember this interval is the first two notes of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

After you feel confident singing them alone. Try combining intervals, by picking a notes and singing a note up, and from the note you land on go up another tone, it should sound familiar!

C – Identify when a change in pitch occurred during a phrase

What does it mean? and how can I practice it?

This one is pretty self-explanatory the examiner will play you a two bar phrase. They will then play the phrase again with a change in pitch. All you need to do is identify whether the change happened at the start or the end of the phrase when played for the second time.

The key to this one is to be able to remember the phrase accurately. Practice it by playing a two bar phrase on your instrument, then singing it back. Then wait 5 seconds and see if you can sing it again perhaps recording yourself. Use this recording to compare with the original phrase on your instrument and assess whether you have memorised it accurately.

D – Listen to a piece played by the examiner and answer some questions based on dynamics or articulation

What does it mean? and how can I practice it?

In the exam you could be asked about 3 different things, these are;

Articulation – was the music slurred or detached?

Dynamics – did a change in dynamics happen suddenly or gradually?

Dynamics – was the music loud or soft?

Let us just check you're happy with some of the terms here. Slurred means the music will be smooth and detached will be broken up. If the dynamics change gradually it means a crescendo or diminuendo occurred in it.

To practice this part of the exam just listen to any type of music (the more types the better) with the questions in front of you and see by listening if you can answer the questions.

Good luck with your aural exams and remember to check out the ABRSM aural app and YouTube for test videos.