

Grade 2 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.) To 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 5 notes of the major scale. This gives us a really easy way to practice it, at first play the first 5 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, DFC, CEC, CGC, etc

There are six intervals (gaps between the notes) that can appear with the grade 2 notes these are called a semi-tone, tone, minor 3rd, major 3rd, perfect 4th and Perfect 5th. If we can hear and sing all 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.

Minor 2nd (going up) – There is perhaps no more foreboding interval than the ascending Minor 2nd, as you can associate it with the first two notes of the theme from Jaws.

Minor 2nd (Descending) – Think of the end of a wedding. The bride and groom have just started kissing and Mendelssohn's Wedding March starts playing as they head back up the aisle. The first two notes of this march form a descending Minor 2nd. You can also think of the first two notes (which are repeated several times) in the classic song "Für Elise."

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."

Minor 3rd (going up) – You've already thought of The Sound of Music once, so why not try it again. This time think of the kids saying goodbye on the stairs and singing "So Long, Farewell." The interval between "so" and "long" is an ascending Minor 3rd. If musicals aren't your thing, however, and you're more into hard rock, think of the first interval in Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" for another example.

Minor 3rd (going down) – The Beatles immortalized the descending Minor 3rd with the first two notes of “Hey Jude.”

a **Major 3rd** (going up) – Get into the Christmas spirit, think of the first two notes of “Have Yourself Merry Little Christmas.”

Major 3rd (going down) – 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.”

Perfect 4th (going up) – The ascending Perfect 4th is one of the most recognizable intervals in music. Think of a wedding, as you did earlier, but this time, picture the bride coming down the aisle. In “Here Comes the Bride,” the interval between “here” and “comes” is an ascending perfect 4th. You can also think of the first two notes of “Amazing Grace.”

Perfect 4th (going down) – Think of the Christmas carol “O come all ye faithful” The first interval that goes down is a perfect 4th.

Perfect 5th (going up) –, The Perfect 5th is one of the easiest thanks to John Williams. Think of the first ascending interval in the main theme from Star Wars and you will never forget the ascending Perfect 5th. If you just can’t think of anything besides Christmas songs, however, you can also remember the first interval in “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.”

Perfect 5th (going down) – The best one to think of here is the first two notes of the theme song from The Flintstones.

After you feel confident singing them alone. Try combining intervals, by picking a note and singing a note up, and from the note you land on go up another tone, then maybe go down a perfect 5th. Check it by trying it on your instrument afterwards

C – Identify when a change in either pitch or rhythm 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 or rhythm. All you need to do is identify whether the change that happened was a pitch change (were the sound of the notes different) or it had a change in rhythm.

The key to this one is to be able to remember the first phrase accurately. Practice it by playing a two bar phrase on your instrument, then singing it back really focusing on the pitch and the rhythm. 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?

Tempo – did it become faster or slower or stay the same?

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. Tempo means the speed of the music.

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.