

'I'm thinking of studying for a theory diploma: which one should I take?'

The answer is another question: you'll need to prepare for the exam; which one are you already equipped to start your preparations?

Within this second question lie two very important points:

1. in order to succeed at any theory diploma exam you must have already done a lot of theoretical study
2. you will need to undertake extensive further study targeted at the specific requirements of a particular diploma.

The knowledge and skills required to pass AMusTCL are the very bedrock on which musicians can then learn and further refine knowledge and skills specified in the syllabuses for LMusTCL, FMusTCL, LTCL and FTCL.

There are two elements in AMusTCL: skills of writing music (traditionally called harmony, counterpoint, melody writing and orchestration) and knowledge of repertoire (studied through analysis and examined by your ability to construct a critique). These in turn require a thorough, accurate and comprehensive knowledge of musical rudiments:

- ▶ clefs, keys, intervals and chords
- ▶ pulse and rhythm
- ▶ types and capabilities of voices and instruments
- ▶ conventions of musical notation.

Potential candidates also need to know and understand the various historical styles of music from the end of the Renaissance to the present time (baroque, classical, romantic and modern periods) and the forms used (binary, ternary, rondo, sonata, etc).

Suitable ways of reaching the stage described above include studying theory of music up to Grade 8 of one of the leading

international exam boards and then passing the exam, studying and passing music in the International Baccalaureate, studying and passing music for A level or Scottish Higher Level.

Students who have completed a course such as is described above will have done far more than merely learn *about* music. They will have come face to face with music in a variety of styles – ie they will have got to know this music well, learning how it was created and put together, what it expresses and how it does this.

So, are you ready yet?

Do you know how to write progressions using four-part harmony correctly, including any and all of the following chords?

- ▶ Triads in root position, first and second inversions
- ▶ The dominant seventh in root position and all three inversions
- ▶ Secondary sevenths
- ▶ The major chord on the supertonic
- ▶ Diminished sevenths
- ▶ Chords of the ninth, eleventh and thirteenth
- ▶ Neapolitan sixth
- ▶ Augmented chords in Italian, French and German forms.

Can you write and recognise modulations between any key and any other key (not limited to the nearly related keys)?

If you think the answer is 'yes', then look at the following two versions of the first phrase of a Lutheran chorale. The first I have written so as to incorporate some of the errors which crop up time and time again in exam answers submitted by candidates who haven't prepared properly for the exam, and the second is taken from Bach's Cantata no. 88.

Can you see anything wrong in the first version?

1.

Riemenschneider 104
(from Cantata 88, 5th Sunday after Trinity)

2.

While I agree that some of the errors are of style, something not included in the list given earlier, there are also grammatical errors:

- ▶ chords used incorrectly and causing consecutive 5ths
- ▶ a double leading note
- ▶ two augmented intervals in the bass part.

If you struggle with this little exercise then you are not yet ready to start on AMusTCL. For one thing, your preparation for this diploma should teach you to avoid such stylistic errors as:

- ▶ inappropriate use of first inversion triad based chords
- ▶ use of a dominant 13th
- ▶ while not an error as such, interrupted cadences are extremely rare in Bach's harmonisations of chorale melodies
- ▶ the static character of both alto and tenor parts, both of which cover only a third.

If you struggle with elementary grammatical accuracy then you will be overwhelmed by these more advanced matters of style.

I should add that, by writing an unstylish interrupted cadence, a grammatical error – a false relation – has been created between the (given) soprano A# and the tenor A.

Even at the lowest level of diploma, AMusTCL, candidates must show that they know and can write correctly in the style of the music set in the question. Look again at Bach's harmonisation of the chorale phrase and you will see that he opens with two root positions of the tonic chord with the bass rising an octave. This is commonplace in Bach's work and any student of this style will have learnt this move after carefully studying a handful of examples¹.

Compare Bach's working with the other and you will also notice that the incorrect one moves entirely in crotchets apart from the minim chord. Bach, on the other hand, uses some quavers in order to give the music a greater sense of flow and make the individual parts more shapely. The alto and tenor both range over a 6th and the bass – as is often the case – has a wider range; here it is an 11th.

If you still make such errors as writing $\frac{5}{4}$ chords incorrectly, doubling the leading note, writing consecutive 5ths (or octaves) or writing ugly intervals in individual parts then you aren't yet ready to start preparing for AMusTCL. First of all you need to work with your teacher so that you can write correct harmony. It's the equivalent of playing or singing the correct notes in a piece you perform.

Now, what about repertoire?

For both AMusTCL and LMusTCL you will have to get to know the score of a piece lasting for several hundred bars. You will have to discern its structure, recognise its style and likely historical source. Can you tell the difference between imitation and a canon? If a piece by Mozart were to start in A minor would you know immediately the keys to which it might most likely modulate? Would you be confident of recognising all of them? If you are looking at an orchestral score are you worried by transposing instruments?

If any of these things would cause you problems then you need to work with your teacher to resolve them before you start working on material for AMusTCL. For LMusTCL you need to be already fully competent at analysing large scale complex works such as a Brahms symphony, a Bartók string quartet or a Walton concerto.

In order to succeed in AMusTCL you need to know your stuff and in the exam you will need to be able to work quickly. One of the common causes of failure is that candidates don't complete their answers to all five of their chosen questions. Someone who submits only four answers needs to be at distinction standard just in order to gain a pass! However, one of the characteristics of a person who gains a distinction is that they are well prepared, work quickly and accurately and so are able to submit five full answers.

The higher level diplomas, LTCL and LMusTCL, are licences which say that in the areas covered by the exam the holder is licensed to practise in a completely professional way. Compared with AMusTCL greater breadth and depth of study are required. Associate diplomas may be thought of as apprenticeships, saying that the holder has a basic competency. With that background someone is then in a position to undertake the study necessary to gain a Licentiatehip. Following that may come the third level where the holder of a Fellowship has shown complete mastery of their chosen field: a breadth and depth of knowledge and skill which, in terms of qualifications, places them among the leaders of their profession.

W V Tomkins

1 Students who prepare for the LMusTCL chamber music question will have to learn that what Bach did frequently in this sort of situation was **not** commonplace in the 19th century.