

A Comparative Study of ABRSM and the Chinese Piano Examination

Ming Tang

Academic affairs office, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Shanghai, 200031, China

MingTang@shcmusic.edu.cn

Abstract. Music education has become an indispensable part of aesthetic education, and social art graded examination are a regular form of evaluating music learning. ABRSM is recognized as one of the most influential music grading bodies in the world. The Chinese graded music examination have greatly boosted the level of music in Chinese society. This paper conducts a comparative study between ABRSM and Chinese piano graded examination from the three aspects of examination categories and subjects, differences in textbook song selection, and differences in evaluation criteria. It has found that the two have a certain complementarity, with each advantages and disadvantages by reflecting the different concepts and standards of social piano education between China and the UK. China's music grading market still has great room and potential for development. ABRSM offers new ideas that can improve China's current piano exam system and teaching methods, paving the way for a more effective piano examination system.

Keywords: Music education, ABRSM, Chinese graded music examination, quality education.

1. Introduction

The continuously improving living standards and the development of music art in China have led to an increasing enthusiasm for learning music. Music education has become an indispensable part of aesthetic education, and social art graded examination are a regular form of evaluating music learning. ABRSM is recognized as one of the most influential music grading bodies in the world. More than 100 years of exploration and development have contributed to the gradual formation of a complete, fair, systematic and effective examination system. It is also a mainstream overseas exam that found its way into the Chinese market. Despite that most music graded examination organized by higher education institutions and music associations in China have only a history of more than 30 years, they have greatly boosted the level of music in Chinese society. This paper conducts a comparative study between ABRSM and Chinese piano graded examination, and contributes to promoting the effective development of quality education under the exam-oriented system, and promoting the standardization, systematization and continuous perfection of China's system of piano graded examination.

2. The History of ABRSM and Chinese Music Graded Examination

ABRSM (The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) was co-founded in 1889 by Sir Alexander MacKenzie, principal of the Royal Academy of Music, and Sir George Grove, director of the Royal College of Music. Their goal is to unite the two institutions to establish an examination institution “inspired by disinterested motives for the benefit of musical education... which would genuinely provide a stimulus and an objective for a high standard of achievement.” [1] This organization was initially only named the “Joint Commission” to provide people with an impartial and authoritative alternative to private testing institutions—at the time, private testing agencies were widely regarded as interest-driven institutions, while the purpose of the Joint Commission was to promote a high level of music education and testing. Sir Hubert Parry briefly described the committee's founding purpose and purpose as follows: “For the most part the objects which approve themselves to us are not so much the award of well-deserved certificates... but to give people something definite to work for... and also to give people... opportunities to be intimately acquainted with the finest kinds of musical art, and to maintain standards of interpretation and an attitude of

thoroughness in connection with music which will enable it to be most fruitful of good.” [1] The Royal Northern College of Music and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland joined ABRSM in 1947 and became full members in 1985. Through this integration, ABRSM has joined the UK's most advantageous music education resources and has gradually developed into the world's top music publishing and testing agency. Currently, more than 650,000 candidates take the ABRSM exam every year in over 90 countries around the world, including China, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Aruba, Oman, and Sierra Leone [1].

The Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the Central Conservatory of Music, and the Guangzhou Piano Association (the predecessor of the Guangdong Musicians Association) are the earliest institutions in mainland China to conduct social music examinations. It was a private event organized by music teachers in the 80s and 90s of the last century [2]. Up to 1991, the music examination activities sponsored by the Chinese Musicians Association officially launched. This is the first national social music examination in China's history and also marks the birth of the Chinese music examination [3]. According to documents from the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, there are currently 121 social art assessment agencies in the country [4]. According to the “2021 General Report on the Development of China's Music Industry”, the scale of the music education and training industry in 2021 was 113.38 billion yuan, an increase of 13.6% over the previous year. The number of music examiners is 2.8 million, and the scale of the music examination industry is 93.537 billion yuan. Given the large audience, China has become a potential market for overseas examining organizations to explore. According to the official annual report, China is ABRSM's fastest-growing overseas test site, with a 48% increase in 2017 alone. Since 2009, Royal Examinations has established representative offices in Shanghai and East China. According to data released by the Imperial Examination Shanghai Office at the 10th-anniversary concert in 2019, in the ten years from 2009 to 2019, the number of applicants for ABRSM in Shanghai has risen from about 500 to about 30,000 per year, an increase of 60 times.

The first intersection between ABRSM and China took place in Hong Kong - the birthplace of ABRSM in China. With the deepening of exchanges between Hong Kong and the mainland, ABRSM gradually spread to China's Pearl River Delta. The beginning of the 21st century saw the entry of ABRSM into Chinese mainland. Following a pilot in Guangzhou, it gradually entered such major cities as Shanghai and Beijing [5], with the scale of candidates increasing year by year, and the exam becoming increasingly popular among Chinese candidates. Official annual reports revealed that China is ABRSM's fastest growing overseas site of exam, with a growth of 48% in 2017 alone [6]. Data released by ABRSM's Shanghai Office at its 10th anniversary concert in 2019 shows that: From 2009 to 2019, the number of registrations at ABRSM in Shanghai increased from around 500 to around 30,000 per year, a 60-fold increase.

3. A Comparative Analysis between ABRSM and China's System of Music Graded Examination

3.1. The Pros and Cons in Exam Categories and Subjects

ABRSM, as one of the most influential music grading institutions in the world, has a highly professional and authoritative music grading system [7]. ABRSM Piano examination are divided into preparatory and grades 1-8, involving more than 35 different instruments and vocal examination. After passing the eight levels, candidates can further take professional diploma examination, which are divided into two directions: performance and teaching, with three levels: ARSM, LRSM, and FRSM. The Music theory exam is also divided into levels 1-8, and candidates must have passed at least level 5 in music theory before registering to performance levels 6-8. ABRSM involves knowledge of music theory, scale arpeggios and sight-reading. This comprehensive examination system helps candidates and their parents realize the importance of comprehensive cultivation of musical qualities such as sight-singing and aural training, music theory, music recognition, composition system and style, and creative background while attaching importance to performance.

It encourages teachers to organically integrate performance skills and music knowledge, so as to improve the performance level of the candidates more comprehensively. Such setting of categories and subjects reflects the learning concept of ABRSM to cultivate all-round and comprehensive music talents. Focusing on the popularization of music and the long-term development of social music education, it allows students to have a pleasant music experience and full participation, thus having a significance far greater than the exam itself.

In contrast, China's music graded examination have a relatively short history, and the establishment of such a perfect and standardized system requires time and the support of music educators. Most of the social piano examination organized by relatively authoritative music colleges and musicians' associations in China take level 10 as the highest level, above which they have set up a number of performance diploma levels. At the same time, they have assessment requirements for solfeggio and aural training, as well as music theory. Basic knowledge of music (music theory) includes music theory and solfeggio is divided into preparatory, elementary, intermediate and advanced levels. candidates must pass the intermediate level of music theory before taking the performance exam levels 9-10. The syllabus of the performance diploma exam above level 10 shows that the piano exam is divided into levels 1-3 of performance. candidates participating in the performance level exam must have passed the piano exam level 10, and the performance level requires advanced ability of music theory. Many Chinese grading institutions have introduced the assessment of musical literacy, but the focus is still on playing skills. Music literacy is not a compulsory content of any level, and the category and subject settings remain relatively simple and outdated, lacking sight-reading, sight-singing and other test points to examine students' real music literacy. This leads to some candidates to practice the repertoire of the exam as the main content of their piano learning, regarding the levels of the examination as their goal in learning, ignoring the gradual learning of music theory and playing skills. As a result of this eager way of learning, candidates tend to be unable to master solid basic skills, and lack a passion for music, which is not conducive to the cultivation of personal comprehensive quality and the long-term development of music learning.

For candidates, music learning should follow the law of learning step by step. The training of finger skills is itself a process of forming muscle memory, which requires constant practice and cannot be achieved overnight. Therefore, if the categories and subjects of China's piano examination can increase the content of aural training, sight-singing, music theory and other assessments of candidates' real music literacy, it can relatively avoid the examinee's exam-oriented attitude.

3.2. Differences in Music Piece Selection in Textbooks

ABRSM tends to focus on developing students' musical creativity and imagination, and promote the diversified development of music learning. Through works of different genres and styles, it strengthens the cultivation of students' musical emotion and creativity [8]. The repertoire of ABRSM involves three sets of works of different genres and styles and different periods: A, B and C. The selection of music basically maintains a balance in terms of the styles of the ages, and etudes are not regarded as the only choice in the selection of music pieces. It can thus be seen that playing skills are not the only criteria that ABRSM values in the exam. candidates can choose one piece from each of the three sets according to their own preferences and areas of expertise. However, how to choose pieces that highlight the candidates' strengths and avoid their weaknesses, and balance the comprehensive effect of A, B and C, requires the wisdom and aesthetics of piano teachers. Most of the pieces in the piano textbooks of ABRSM are title works with beautiful melody and distinctive personality throughout the history. These vivid pieces boosts candidates' understanding and appreciation of the diversity of musical styles, help them to more accurately grasp different styles of performance and emotional expression, and stimulate their interest in learning and performance while improving music aesthetics [9]. In recent years, ABRSM has invested a lot of manpower and material resources in the commission of new pieces and the promotion of local composers. At the same time, considering the diversity of market needs and the diversified development of styles, ABRSM almost always introduces at least one or two Chinese works when revising its syllabus [10]. The exam

textbooks of ABRSM are revised every two years. The constant updating of the music pieces avoids the drudgery of an old repertoire. While guiding students not to only learn the pieces for the exam, this approach also encourages music teachers to constantly learn new pieces, improve their repertoire reserves, broaden their musical vision and improving their teaching ability.

Chinese piano examination pays more attention to “skills” than “art”, and “music skills” is regarded as more important than “music art” [11]. Most of the domestic piano exam textbooks are classified by etudes, polyphonic works and music in the mode of professional colleges, lacking the works of modern cutting-edge composers, and focusing more on the design and arrangement of technical training of performance [12]. The social piano exam textbooks of the relatively authoritative music colleges and musicians associations in China are relatively professional and technical in terms of content setting, and have relatively high technical requirements for the candidates. This has a lot to do with the tendency of Chinese piano education model to playing skills. This targeted technical practice can improve the independence and fluency of the fingers to some extent. In the process of learning the piano, extensive and long-term finger training can improve the core basic skills of playing in piano learning. However, the relatively fixed selection of music pieces, as well as the lack of interesting and creative content that is optional and conforms to the psychological characteristics of candidates, is not conducive to the development of candidates' personality. Most of the textbooks do not provide clear marks on the introduction of the composer, the creation background, the difficulty of the music, the structure of the musical form, etc., which is not conducive to the self-regulated learning of the candidates and the overall improvement of their musical literacy.

It can thus be seen that exam textbooks need to innovate and advance with the times. Only in this way can piano teachers constantly update their teaching content and repertoire, and improve their teaching ability and musical vision. At the same time, the music piece selection of piano exam textbooks should not only ensure the professionalism of the works, but also consider the popularization of social education, and timely increase the songs with high audibility and in line with the psychological characteristics of the candidates, especially the younger ones. Adding the introduction of the composers and the brief analysis of the creation background, the music pieces, the difficulty of playing and the structure of the musical form in the textbooks is more conducive to the students' self-regulated learning and the cultivation of their musical quality.

3.3. Differences in Terms of Evaluation Criteria

According to ABRSM's offline exam outline, the full score of the performance exam is 150 points, 100-119 is marked as Pass, 120-129 is marked as Merit, and 130 points and above are marked as Distinction. The three groups of self-selected music with different stylistic features score 30 points each, scale arpeggios and sight-reading score 21 points each, and listening scores 18 points. After the exam, a score sheet will be given to candidates with specific scores for each of these six aspects and comments on their performance. ABRSM's rating scale breaks down musical performance into five basic evaluation dimensions: pitch, time, tone, shape and performance. Among them, "shape" involves the syntax and details of the music, while "performance" mainly tests the candidates' mastery of the instrument, understanding of the music and degree of engagement. As can be seen from the official explanation of ABRSM, “To succeed in our Practical examination, candidates need a combination of skills and understanding. ABRSM examination are music examination rather than instrumental or singing examination. Examiners assess the quality of the music-making, not how it's achieved.” [13] Obviously, ABRSM highlights teacher-student interaction, quantitative score evaluation and targeted written comments. Such diversified and comprehensive evaluation criteria can help candidates gain a clear understanding of their music learning status and become more objectively aware of their strengths, weaknesses and directions for improvement. This high-quality mode of piano exam is not only an assessment of musical skills, but rather stimulates the candidates' interest, motivation and sense of achievement in music learning. Only in this way, the passion for music will benefit the candidates for a lifetime.

Generally speaking, the full score of the domestic exam is 100 points, 90 points and above are marked as Distinction, 75-89 points are marked as Merit, and 60-74 points are marked as Pass. The scoring criteria are mainly divided into three aspects: proficiency, playing skill and musical understanding. To be graded as Distinction, candidates need to demonstrate skilled, complete playing with no misnotes, specified speed requirements, correct clauses, clear sound, pure timbre, a strong sense of rhythm, and solid basic skills. String and vocal music require good intonation. One should be able to master the style and genre characteristics of musical compositions, be expressive and demonstrate a good sense of music. Correspondingly, if a candidate falls slightly short on any of the criteria, the rating level will be different. One possible drawback is that the final grade presentation is more through scores rather than written comments. Accordingly, the candidates tend to pay more attention to the results of the examination and ignore the importance of music learning itself. The setting of piano examination should aim at providing candidates with an opportunity to demonstrate and evaluate themselves, learn to control and adjust their performance anxiety in piano examination [14], and achieve self-improvement through continuous efforts. The importance of this learning process is greater than the forms, the outcomes are phased, and the long-term cultivation of music quality is lifelong.

There is no doubt that it is not easy to establish reasonable, effective and comprehensive evaluation criteria. The combination of quantitative scores and qualitative words in ABRSM's evaluation model is worth learning. It makes the candidates' cognition of their performance more clear and objective, and also makes the piano exam more professional and effective.

4. Conclusion

ABRSM is a form of grading based on the western music system and cultural foundation. Its long history has made ABRSM one of the most influential music grading bodies in the world, with a very professional and authoritative music grading system. Most piano examination of China's higher education institutions and music associations, etc. have a history of only more than 30 years, about a century later than ABRSM. However, to a large extent, they have promoted the development of China's social piano level, making well-recognized achievements. The purpose of social piano education is not only to teach piano playing skills, or to train professional performers, but also to cultivate students' interests, hobbies and specialties through the medium of the piano, so as to realize the overall improvement of musical accomplishment and comprehensive quality. Shaping good character and quality through aesthetic education is the significance of music education. In view of this, it is suggested to set up sight-reading, sight-singing and other aspects of test to examine students' real music quality in domestic piano examination, so as to guide candidates to learn the standardization and science of piano; in terms of music selection, it is suggested to add novel pieces with different styles and high audibility, and to add brief introductions to the composers, the creation background, the music pieces and the difficulty of performance, and the structure of musical forms in the textbooks. It is suggested to make the evaluation criteria more detailed and quantitative, and provide written comments so that candidates can have a more objective self-cognition, clarify the direction of further improvement, and get a full sense of experience and achievement.

The comparison between ABRSM and Chinese piano examination shows that the former reflects more the diversity and cutting-edge features of music style, teaching method, quality training and other aspects, while Chinese examination are better at systematic performance training through standardized technical exercises and traditional works. The two are complementary to a certain extent, each having its own advantages and disadvantages, reflecting the differences between China and the UK in terms of their concepts and standards of the social piano education. Through the above comparative study, this paper aims to provide theoretical and practical guidance for the reform of Chinese piano education. China's music grading market still has great room and potential for development. ABRSM's test provides a new idea for us to improve China's current piano exam system, methods of piano teaching, and explore a better piano exam system. It is believed that piano

examination can stimulate people's passion for music learning, and cultivate more excellent musical talents while realizing aesthetic education and quality training. We look forward to the prosperity of China's piano education.

References

- [1] ABRAMS official website. <https://gb.abrsm.org/zh/about-us/our-history/>. Accessed 1. Sep. 2023.
- [2] Zhang, Boyu. Industrialized Music Education in China: A Discussion on the Standard Grade Examinations in Musico (SGEM) Organized by the Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing. *COLLEGIUM: Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (21): 103-120. 2016.
- [3] Liu, X. L. A 60-year development history of China's piano art (9) piano examination in the mass fervour for learning the piano. *Piano Art*, (01): 26-28. 2010.
- [4] Official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China. List of social and artistic proficiency assessment agencies. <https://zfw.mct.gov.cn/shysspkkjg?type=gb&pageNum=8>. Accessed 2. Sep. 2023.
- [5] Wright, D. C.. *The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music: a social and cultural history*. Boydell Press. nP249. 2013.
- [6] Annual Review 2017. ABRSM official website. <https://gb.abrsm.org/media/63932/abrsm-annual-review-2017-final-web.pdf>. Accessed 1. Sep. 2023.
- [7] Zhang, R. N. A comparative study of Chinese and overseas piano exam systems: A case study of Chinese Musicians' Association and ABRAMS. *Home Drama* (07), 100-102. 2022.
- [8] Liu, Y. The enlightenment of ABRAMS for Chinese models of piano teaching and examination. *Home Drama*, (11), 51-52. 2021.
- [9] Liu, X and Lv T. M. The pros and cons of the popularization of ABRAMS in China's social music education. *Piano Art*, (10), 40-44. 2017.
- [10] Huang, Y. Yang J. Zheng W. M. and Luo C. R. Comparison and evaluation of the music exam system of China and the UK. *Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts (Music and Performance)*, (02), 189-196. 2022.
- [11] Shang, Z. X. A comparative study of the piano exam textbooks in China and the UK. Master's thesis, Hunan Normal University. 8-9, 2018.
- [12] Liu, J. X. and Cai L. H. An analysis of the problems in piano exam textbooks in China. *Art Education*, (02), 71-75. 2023.
- [13] ABRAMS official website. <https://cn.abrsm.org/en/our-exams/what-is-a-graded-music-exam/>. Accessed 2. Sep. 2023.
- [14] Egilmez, H. O. Music education students' views related to the piano examination anxieties and suggestions for coping with students' performance anxiety. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 2088-2093. 2012.