

Free Choice Pieces
Guide to selecting pieces and studies of a suitable standard
Drums

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 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 – At least 3 voices established, understanding of quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes. An ability to demonstrate alternate, single strokes, double strokes and paradiddles. Bass drum control, heel down or toe. An ability to play a basic rhythmic pattern to steady tempo (from 60bpm) with controlled projection of voices.
- Pre Grade Higher – As above but with greater diversity of values on snare and bass drum. Rhythmic security at a fixed tempo (from 60 to 80bpm) a focus above diversity of voices.

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 balance and articulate projection is not expected but by Pre Grade Higher, players will be expected to display a very basic “groove” and developing balance with particular attention to snare/bass control. The ability to maintain rhythmic security throughout the piece an overriding objective.

Musicality/expression, expectations: There is a very basic expectation of stylistic expression at this level. Avoidance of awkwardness musically is sufficient. Awkwardness may include abrupt movements and momentary losses of rhythmic security. The use of dynamic contrast will enhance a performance but will not be expected to pass at this level.

Level 1 – Grades 1-3

- Grade 1 – All 10 of the voices of a standard drum kit are introduced : snare, hi-hat closed, hi-hat open, hi-hat with foot, bass, three toms, ride and crash cymbals. Values of quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes. Basic grooves and fills with rhythmic security paramount at tempos between 60 and 100 bpm.
- Grade 2 – As Grade 1 but with increasing diversity of rhythms demanding co-ordination development. Movement from hi-hat to ride within the piece and displaced hi-hat opening grooves. Flams, triplets, basic roll or buzz technique and paradiddles within the context of the piece and stick work developing fluency.
- Grade 3 – As Grade 2 but with more complexity and variation including dotted values, triplets and swung rhythms. Here, an element of stylistic awareness and balanced projection is expected. Phrasing, crescendo and diminuendo to enhance rhythmic security and the dynamic shape of the piece defined. It can be stated that at this grade rhythmic security is a mandatory element.

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. They should show the ability to play fluently at an appropriate tempo with a developing sense of ensemble and rhythm section dynamic placement.

Musicality/expression, expectations: There is basic expectation of expression at this level. Performances should avoid awkwardness musically such as inappropriate emphasis

of voices that interrupt a groove. The use of some basic dynamic contrast is expected at this level such as piano/forte. 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 to pass at this level. Similarly, performances should display an awareness of articulation and phrasing at this level such as the use of flams, ghosting, cross sticks and rim shots on the snare, more detailed use of these will enhance a performance but will not be expected to pass at this level.

Level 2 – Grades 4

- Grade 4 - Developed and varied uses of values across the 10 voices with the addition of rim shots, ghost snare, buzz snare and ride cymbal bell. Diversity of common values. Comfortable with diverse rhythmic patterns including utilising dotted quaver rhythms at a variety of tempos. A full and stylistic approach to swung rhythms with stylistic awareness of balance, projection and tone demonstrated to some extent.

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, clear focused sound at all dynamics and clear articulation including paying full attention to the subtlety of articulation including accents and cymbal chokes. At this level rhythmic security should be considered mandatory to secure a pass.

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. More detailed dynamic contrast for a detailed understanding of phrasing etc. will enhance a performance but will not be expected to pass at this level.