

Listening to Music with Understanding - 2

ABRSM Aural Tests “Musical Features” : How to answer questions on Character

*** Please read Section 1 (Grades 1 - 3) ***

From Grade 4:

The question on character in a piece of music crops up at Grade 4 ABRSM Aural Tests.

Part I

The first part of the question is about finding words to describe the character of what is heard.

It has to be said that some people have a better vocabulary than others, and can recall words to describe what they are hearing. Having said that there is more than one way to describe character:

(1) Adjectives

Use adjectives to describe the mood or emotional content of the piece. Try not to use happy and sad. Other words for happy might be merry, joyous, smiling.

You could use Italian Performance Directions: *espressivo*, *grave*, *sostenuto*, *delicato*, *amoroso*, *mesto*, *semplice*, *tranquillo*

Fanny Waterman, in her excellent short book, *On Piano Teaching and Performance*, has a list which starts:–
charm - tragedy - tranquillity - resignation - happiness and sadness
humour - brilliance - playfulness - anger - etc.

Please buy the book if you want the rest. I recommend it.

(2) Visual image: “It makes me think of ...”

Or, you could describe what visual image it conveys to you (“It makes me think of ...” e.g. galloping horses, a funeral procession, a circus, etc.). What film scene might it accompany? “It’s like when a ghost comes into a room.”

Part II

But the more important part of this question is the second part: “What in the music makes you think it has the character you say?” Here, you have to refer back to the elements of music (if the dynamics contribute to the character, say so, even if you have just answered a question about dynamics). For example, you might say “It makes me think of a funeral procession because it has a slow pulse and is in the minor mode, and you played it *piano* and *legato*.”)

Here are some of the elements of music to consider:

Tempo - fast, slow, getting gradually/suddenly faster or slower

Dynamics - loud, quiet, getting gradually/suddenly louder or quieter

Articulation - staccato or legato

Pitch - the notes are relatively high or low (the correct word here is “Register”)

Texture - thick chords, or thin