

RIAM Exams

Guide to Selecting Pieces for Performance Grades

Woodwind

Pieces should match the technical requirements expected for a similar level of Practical Grade. Teachers can assess this by referencing the repertoire in RIAM Exams syllabi for the instrument at that grade level. Selections that are significantly easier than the exercises would not be considered suitable.

When assessing the RIAM Exams syllabi lists or any choice piece you wish to consider, the key considerations include:

- **Range and Keys:** Pieces should reflect the scale requirements for the similar RIAM Practical Exams grade, covering a substantial portion of the range, including its extremes. For woodwind instruments, this includes exploring the appropriate fingerings for different keys and developing flexibility across major, minor, and chromatic scales. Double-reed instruments (oboe, bassoon) require greater focus on embouchure control across the range, while single-reed instruments (clarinet, saxophone) should demonstrate consistent tone production, particularly in register transitions. Scales are not required in Performance Grades but remain a useful guide for assessing open-choice repertoire.
- **Rhythmic Complexity:** The rhythmic demands of pieces should align with the similar grade in RIAM Practical Exams. The specific rhythms do not need to match exactly but should be of equivalent complexity. For woodwind instruments, this involves coordination between tonguing, breath support, and finger movement, particularly during syncopation, tied notes, and rapid passages.
- **Technical and Expressive Elements:** While pieces do not need to cover all technical and expressive criteria, they should include a suitable selection of elements, such as legato phrasing, articulation, and dynamic control. Double-reed players should pay special attention to controlled embouchure and breath, especially in sustained passages, while single-reed players should manage register breaks and maintain smooth slurring. For flute players, breath control and tone consistency across dynamic ranges are key considerations.

Performance and Requirements

Grade 1

- Basic understanding of note values, including semibreves, minims, crotchets, and tied notes.
- Ability to tongue and sustain notes with consistent tone in both stepwise motion and small leaps.
- Familiarity with basic fingerings in common keys (up to 1 sharp or flat). Control of basic articulation, including legato and simple tonguing.
- **Single-reed (clarinet, saxophone):** Initial focus on managing register transitions with embouchure consistency.
- **Double-reed (oboe, bassoon):** Emphasis on breath support and avoiding excessive embouchure tension.

Grade 2

- Ability to play stepwise and scalar passages in major and minor keys (up to 2 sharps or flats).
- Introduction to slurring two or more notes per breath.
- Control of simple rhythmic patterns, including quavers and dotted notes.
- Basic breath control to sustain phrases of 4–6 beats.
- **Flute:** Focus on achieving consistent tone in both low and mid registers.
- **Double-reed:** Control of tone during dynamic changes to avoid “squeezing” the sound.

Pieces at this level are generally short and simple, often around 8–16 bars in length. Players will typically focus on tone quality, basic articulation, and maintaining a steady tempo with a simple sense of phrasing.

Grade 3

- Develop a range spanning approximately a 10th.
- Understand keys and accidentals up to 2 sharps or flats.
- Ability to execute slurred passages of multiple notes per breath.
- Handle more complex rhythms, including dotted and syncopated rhythms, at various tempi.

Grade 4

- Extended range to cover a 12th, with more frequent use of upper registers.
- Understand keys and accidentals up to 4 sharps or flats and play chromatic passages confidently.
- Manage varied articulation patterns, including legato, staccato, and marcato.
- Demonstrate increased control over dynamics, including crescendos and diminuendos.
- Comfort with rhythmic patterns in compound time at varying speeds.
- **Double-reed:** Special attention to smooth dynamic transitions and maintaining a warm tone.
- **Single-reed:** Management of embouchure adjustments during faster passages and register shifts.

Pieces at these levels are typically short to moderate in length, ranging from 16 to 32 bars. Players are expected to demonstrate a clear tone, consistent articulation, and accurate intonation, with repertoire introducing slurs, accents, and contrasting dynamics.

Grade 5

- Extended range to a minimum of an octave and a 6th, with greater fluency across registers.
- Understand and perform key signatures involving multiple sharps and flats, as well as chromatic and modal scales.
- Controlled register shifts with smooth transitions.
- Manage more advanced slurred passages and ornaments.
- Handle longer and quicker passages using semiquavers at faster tempi.
- **Flute:** Emphasis on consistent tone production in higher registers.
- **Double-reed:** Control of airflow to avoid cracks or inconsistencies in rapid passages.

Grade 6

- Extended range to a minimum of 2 octaves, with confident use of upper and lower registers.
- Expand knowledge of complex keys and perform harmonic and melodic scales seamlessly.
- Play rapid chromatic passages and slurred scales confidently.
- Develop advanced phrasing techniques, including rubato.
- Increased use of expressive devices such as rallentando and accelerando.

Pieces at these levels will be moderate in length, ranging from about 32 to 64 bars. Players are expected to demonstrate a clear, strong tone across all registers, accurate articulation, and expressive phrasing.

Grade 7

- Extended range to a minimum of 2 octaves and a 3rd, with mastery of rapid register shifts.
- Master keys and accidentals with multiple sharps and flats, including whole-tone and modal scales.
- Demonstrate control of vibrato (where applicable) and dynamic shaping.
- Confidently handle extended slurred and articulated passages.
- Manage complex rhythms, including syncopation and irregular patterns.
- **Double-reed:** Greater emphasis on smooth transitions in dynamic contrasts without affecting tone quality.

Grade 8

- Extended range to a minimum of 2 octaves and a 4th, with fluent control of all registers.
- Understand and perform a wide variety of keys and melodic patterns, including ornamented and chromatic lines.
- Execute advanced techniques, such as flutter tonguing (where applicable), mordents, and trills.
- Manage extended legato phrases with sustained breath control.
- Handle rhythmic complexity confidently, including mixed meter and syncopated phrases.

Senior Certificate

- Extended range to a minimum of 2 octaves and a 5th, with mastery of complex fingerings and articulation patterns.
- Display mastery of scales in numerous keys, including chromatic and modal scales.
- Execute advanced technical elements such as rapid ornaments, double-tonguing (where required), and advanced dynamic shaping.
- Handle complex rhythmic structures, including irregular time signatures and rubato passages.

Pieces at these levels range from moderate to extended length. Players are expected to demonstrate a consistently clear and focused tone across all dynamics and registers, mastery of advanced articulation, and an established sense of musical phrasing.

The correct selection of pieces will help evidence a strong level of expressive control, including the effective use of dynamic contrast, such as piano, pianissimo, forte, fortissimo, crescendo, and diminuendo, along with expressive devices like rallentando and accelerando. Performances should show an advanced awareness of musical phrasing, with refined control of articulation and tone to suit the musical context.