



2020 Piano Syllabus: The First 40 Years

by Ruth Anderson

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At this time next spring the new Syllabus package will be available for distribution to members. Committee members have written many articles describing the content and features. Inasmuch as I am a serious pack-rat, pretend to engage in historical research, and have been involved as a teacher and judge since the program's inception, I would like to share some history.

Paul Freed, Professor of Piano at the University and former MMTA president, initiated the syllabus program as a guide to students and teachers providing a comprehensive program of technical skills, sightplaying, theory and performance from various historical periods. Paul was familiar with the Canadian examination system, and in the 1960's he and Shirley Rediger, MMTA president, spent time in Canada studying their system. Made possible by grants from the Bush and Bremer Foundations, the first Syllabus was published in 1970 and capably administered by Ethel Hascall.

Colleges and universities throughout the state were contacted for their endorsement, and their facilities used for testing sites. Paul personally traveled to many sites to train prospective judges.

A theory testing program was already in place and these exams were incorporated into the comprehensive program. A performance-only certificate was available for those bypassing the theory exams beginning with the 1978 syllabus. All syllabi had 11 levels – until 2010, which will add a preparatory level. All award extra points for repertoire memorized. Special books of studies, *Adventures in Time and Space*, were compiled and published for levels 1 – 6.

A brief overview of the first four syllabi invites interesting comparisons.

1970 -- Critiques were to be written in third person and directed to the Board of Examiners. This policy was gradually abandoned. The total of each level was 100 points, with categories of Pass, Excellence, and Distinction. Essays were required in levels 5 – 10, questions in levels 1 – 4 and 11. Pentachords were played in parallel motion with 2-note slur patterns. Only one substitution was allowed, from the current contest list only, and a written request was necessary. Pentachords in various patterns were included through level 4, and for each level specific parallel major and minor keys were required for technical skills.

In upper levels, scales included detached, in thirds and sixths, and contrary major and minor. Repertoire lists were much shorter than in the current syllabus.

1978 -- Students were required to list 3 choices of testing centers on their application and assignments were made after all registrations were in. Written requests for the one allowed substitution were required, but additional substitutions were permitted at upper levels. The top scoring category, 80 – 100, was divided into Distinction and High Distinction. Various touches were required in pentachords, and Lydian and Phrygian pentachords were added in level 4. Required keys for technical skills were no longer limited to the same keys for all skills. Repertoire lists were expanded. The most challenging addition was major scales in double thirds for levels 7 and higher, and harmonic scales in contrary motion at level 10.

1981 -- Scoring was expanded to 120, then 130 points at upper levels. Essays were discontinued, replaced by oral questions at all levels. A glossary of skills was included. Pentachords in contrary motion were introduced.

Chord and arpeggio sequences in upper levels were introduced, and scales in double thirds were discontinued. An Addendum was published in 1982, and substitutions from the contest lists of the previous four years were permitted.

1989 -- Scoring was expanded to 100 – 165 points. The Studies lists were expanded to include other publications, and some of the previous selections in Adventures were placed at different levels. Contrary scales were dropped from upper levels, and scales in octaves were added. Repertoire lists were constantly expanded, particularly for the contemporary period.

These Syllabi have been constantly under review, and adapted to serve the changing needs of teachers and students, always without compromising the integrity of the program. Minnesota is the first state in the nation with a comprehensive program of this magnitude, and is still the only state, except for Illinois, with a comparable program. It is especially invaluable for inexperienced teachers as a teaching tool and reference, even if students do not participate in the program. After earning my music degrees in the '50's I went out into the world with a decent knowledge of music literature, but clueless as to what and how to teach elementary and intermediate students. Yet some of my students learned in spite of their teacher. The syllabus program has been the linchpin of my teaching since 1970.

If I were to say the 2010 will be the best Syllabus yet, my prejudice would be obvious.

September 2020 Update: Ten years have passed since Ruth Anderson compiled this history of the MMTA Piano Syllabus, and now a new edition has been completed. Check out the What's New article on the MMTA Resources page to read about the 2020 Piano Syllabus, Preparation Book, Resource Book, and Resource File.