

Syllabus review

ROCKSCHOOL ACOUSTIC GUITAR

Debut to Grade 8

Rockschool Ltd

£14.99–£16.99

With each volume sporting a bright image of a recognisable star playing an acoustic guitar, the scene is set: RSL here declares its intention with its new 2016 syllabus, aimed at providing both tutors and pupils with repertoire, complementary materials and relevant tests.

The syllabus guide is available from RSL's website, as are all supportive and backing audio tracks (with a code in each book allowing access to these). Helpfully, everything else needed for the exam is in each volume.

Pieces are presented in clear clef and tablature notations, including duet arrangement options for each grade, either by means of a second supportive guitar part or simply a vocal line (exam performances must be to the backing tracks provided). Of the three pieces required, at least one must be chosen from the relevant book; others can be free choices, but the quality and range of the material on offer means that pupils will not need to go outside the books unless they have particular reasons for doing so. Facts such as some recording and chart history precede each piece, as does a handy text with biographical and other details to flesh out knowledge and understanding of the music and artist, composer or band, and concise technical advice follows each piece.

An exercise section features scales, arpeggios and chords, with an added 'Stylistic Study' – a choice of three – for the high grades. This completes the performing section of the exam and 75% of its possible marks. The remaining quarter is made up of aural tests, sight-reading or improvisation and interpretation examples (replaced by 'Quick Study Piece' examples for the top three grades), and sample questions covering musicianship.

Sight-reading and improvisation are included here as an either-or option. Both these subjects will delight many teachers. At the early grades, scales are presented descending, then ascending, as well as the usual up-down sequence, the former far more useful to an improvising guitarist. Often wondering where the slavery to scales beginning with an ascent came from, I also encourage exam candidates

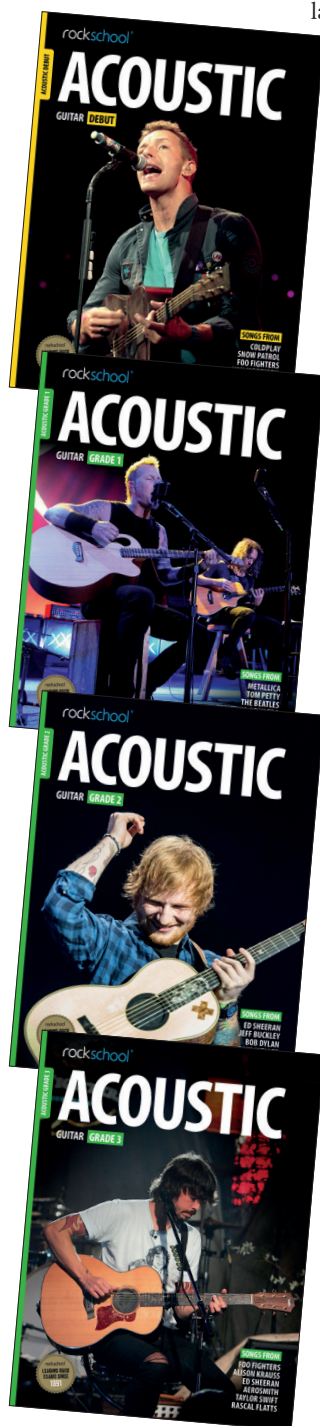
to learn their scales inside out. From Grade 3 onwards, swung and straight feels can be specified by the examiner, another useful touch. Arpeggios at the earliest levels can cover a realistic range for each available group of notes on the instrument, and sometimes a musical approach to the scheme of broken chords (as in AB's classical syllabus) is used. For later levels, arpeggios and scales appear in more traditionally academic formats.

It is very encouraging to see the chords labeled as 'voicings', correctly implying that the guitar has many ways of shaping a chord. As teachers we all-too often inherit students with delusions that there is such a chord as the singular 'G' – a barrier that then needs to be broken down to introduce the learner to the joys of voicing chords in different ways. Putting this concept at the heart of an exam syllabus is wise and worth celebrating.

Once quick study pieces are introduced (teachers familiar with AB's jazz syllabus will understand the notion immediately), in the exam pupils will be given a choice of styles, a score and an audio demonstration, then some study time, after which the candidate plays along to the backing track. This might represent what is expected from a session musician, and so is certainly beneficial training.

The books are generally very accurate, although there are few anomalies in notation, often regarding altered chords or 'blue' notes: for example, when flat 3rds are shown as such but the 'blue' flattened 5th is sometimes given as a sharpened 4th (as in the *Blues and Country Stylistic Study* for Grade 8 – while in *Pride and Joy* at Grade 6 the notation is less consistent, more pragmatic, and subsequently better). A few other strange notations (for example, B# – rather than C – as the flat 9th of a B chord (page 53, bar 31, Grade 7) may not give the student the best indication of correct harmonic thinking. As with many publishers, #9ths are often (not always) spelt as flat 3rds. Otherwise the very useful and well-placed courtesy chord symbols given above the notation are tidy and accurate, just occasionally not allowing for all the extensions in the arrangement.

Those of us who remember Rockscool from its founding days at the start of the 1990s will recognise that the board has moved with the times and will not be surprised to find contemporary material here alongside songs now considered as classics of the genre. »





Among the chosen material (running from Hoagy Carmichael to Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran) there is something to please everyone, enough variety to guard tutors against tired ears, and nothing to fault. Arrangements are consistently excellent, with the only question mark presented by a slightly and unusually simplified (less formulaic, and therefore possibly harder to learn) version of *Blackbird* at Grade 5.

The books also cover the Performance Certificate option (the candidate performing five pieces, each marked out of 20). This is a review of the books rather than an exam critique but one element that may interest teachers is a pass

mark (for Grade exams as well as the Performance Certificate) of 60%.

Throughout the range of books, the layout is clear, and the syllabus easy to understand. Acoustic guitar is hugely popular with all ages, and there are no signs of the growth in enthusiasm letting up. RSL's new addition to the suites of material for formal study of this versatile instrument will serve well both to complement and as a viable comprehensive alternative in this growing exam market.

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