

# Negotiating Effective Piano Pedagogy and Music Examinations in Penang, Malaysia: The Impact of The Associated Board of The Royal Schools of Music on Piano Instruction

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The notion of music as a universal element of human culture is validated by the fact that each society possesses its own unique musical system and expression. However, within this general commonality, there exist panoplies of musical and pedagogical practices. Interestingly, in many cultures, the study of music is primarily characterized by social-cultural *raison d'être* that very often diverge from its intrinsic educational objectives and aesthetic significance. In the Malaysian context, the act of teaching and learning the piano is very much motivated by undertaking a uniquely British tradition of music examinations. A dominant force that has been playing a key role in shaping the course of Malaysia's music education in the past fifty years is The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), the country's leading foreign provider of music assessment. ABRSM, together with other imported music examination boards have played a vital role in the propagation of music examinations in Malaysia. These music assessments have become the sole benchmark for formal musical achievement in this country. Hence, it is commonly construed that the primary objective of this private music education

industry is centered on meeting the syllabus requirements as prescribed by these foreign music examination boards. Consequently, these examinations have by far become an unprecedented indicator of success in the process of music learning and teaching. This curious form of *modus operandi* in the private music education milieu has perpetuated an examination-oriented culture that views music lessons as synonymous to music testing.

This article explores the extant social-educational impact of ABRSM on the pedagogical practices of piano instructors in Penang, Malaysia. ABRSM music examinations results have traditionally become a criterion by which competency in performance, theory and teaching techniques are measured. Certificates of achievement are conferred upon successful candidates in a syllabus of graded examinations. Therefore, it can be construed that this tangible mode of assessment is imperative to the reputation and survival of the private music instructor in Malaysia. Conversely, the danger of misusing the examination syllabus as a teaching curriculum has seriously impacted the way in which music is being taught. This is especially evident in a scenario where only examination pieces, with the exclusion of others, are being taught and learned in the lesson. As teachers race to prepare their students to enter these annual music examinations, the issue of negotiating effective pedagogy and music exams has become inevitable concern.

Penang's link to its colonial past provides fertile ground to initiate a study on the impact of ABRSM on the current status of piano instruction in Malaysia. To facilitate data collection and elucidation of information, a survey was conducted on a sample population of piano instructors in Penang. The design of the research instrument and the methodology employed is described later in this article.

### **The Advent of Private Piano Instruction and It's Social-Educational Implications in Malaysia**

Cognizant of the growing presence of economic, social and political changes during the colonial period, the British initiated many urbanization projects. Consequently, these projects resulted in the rapid growth of new townships throughout the Malay peninsular. The proliferation of

western music, a byproduct of colonial urbanization, germinated a subculture that took shape in the diachronic premise of musical taste. The ubiquity of the piano as a semiotic representation of music from the west stimulated a taste culture that was linked to the middle and upper class societies. Private music instruction began to flourish and pioneer teachers were brought in from Goa, India and the Philippines to meet the demand of interest in serious western art music (Chopyak 1986:132).

Having said this, it may be surmised that Western music, especially classical music was, and still is today, viewed as a symbolic indicator of higher social status in Malaysia. The subscription to this notion allows us to question the implicit reasons of learning the piano, which may be described by sociological and educational rhetoric. In the context of societal considerations, the dichotomous entities of class and taste public are inseparable. This linkage between musical tastes and social class, usually defined in terms of socio-economic status and occupational category, have been reported in a number of studies, particularly those by Gans and Hargreaves (Russell 1999: 143). Supporting this theory of musical taste and social class is one offered by DiMaggio and Useem (1978:146), who argue that the consumers of classical music comprised predominantly individuals who belong to a higher income bracket and education level.

The act of learning and listening to Western classical music is very often viewed upon as a putative element of 'high-culture' in the Malaysian society. This impressionistic reference has precariously taken precedence over what is considered the primal objectives of music learning. Similarly, the act of learning the piano and the ownership of the instrument are definitive indicators of one's social standing and status. Ross argues that the custom of learning the piano has undergone a metamorphosis, reflecting a "status symbol" amongst Malaysia's middle and upper-middle class families (2003: 139).

Another issue pertaining to the purpose of learning the piano is the subject of music examinations. This concerns the domination of music examinations over the lives of most music teachers and students in Malaysia (Power: 1999). It has been argued that these music assessments have

deterred many students from real music making and enjoyment. Displays of attitudinal behavior towards music learning have been attributed to the unique Malaysian educational structure that places a strong emphasis on examinations as an all-encompassing tool in measuring academic or performance success (Tye 2000). An article in the *New Straits Times* by Zakiah Koya (1999) reported that most teachers acknowledge the fact that they have become part of a system that advocates an objective rather than a procedural format of assessment. Quoting Zakiah:

They (the teachers) acknowledge that they are part of a system which is only interested in seeing students pass with flying colours instead of helping them become functional individuals. (Zakiah 1999:17).

This conundrum dictates a music educational system that places emphasis on tangible assessments over the form and function of acquired knowledge. It may be construed that examination results have taken precedence over the essence and objectives of learning the piano.

### **The Introduction of ABRSM to Malaysia**

To assess and evaluate competency in aspects of performance and music theory, most music students enroll for external public music examinations conducted by ABRSM, London. The ABRSM syllabus offers graded rudiments of music history and theory together with performance as well as teaching assessments. This form of private music instruction began in the mid-1940s to represent and symbolize the epitome of English culture and tradition that was held in the highest regard. There are currently six foreign music examination boards in Malaysia, ABRSM being the largest and most popular among the six. According to Eric Taylor, an ABRSM examiner, Malaysia currently ranks first in the world in terms of the number of examination candidates outside of the United Kingdom. The most popular choice of instrumental study is the piano with 5,000 to 10,000 candidates registered for examination each year (*The New Straits Times*, 16 June, 1991). ABRSM has procured more than a million Malaysian

candidates since 1948 with more than thirty examiners visiting the country each year (Ross 2002:10).

The ABRSM of London was established in 1889, representing a partnership between four British music institutions: The Royal Academy of Music, Royal College of Music, Royal Northern College of Music and Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. The affiliation with these four renowned music colleges has accorded credibility to its music assessments and prestige to its program structure. By garnering such an elevated degree of status and recognition, it can be conjectured that the perception of the Board's programs are highly regarded in terms of its standards, integrity and kudos. ABRSM's programs and courses are perceived to be well-researched, tested and supported by its inhouse panel of reviewers. This panel comprises musicians and academics of considerable professional stature. Since its establishment, the Associated Board has been providing music examinations and assessments to both candidates in the United Kingdom and to over ninety countries around the globe. The operation of ABRSM's system of examination and assessments is virtually available in every country but is particularly prevalent and popular in countries that were once British colonies. Inquiries pertaining to ABRSM's program offerings, examination syllabus and services are facilitated through the Board's representatives found in every country where these examinations take place. The Malaysian Ministry of Education has been representing ABRSM's operations since the 1960s. Prior to this, examinations were conducted in a more domestic setting, either in homes of music teachers or music schools owned by expatriates.

External music examinations in Malaysia were pioneered by the Trinity College of Music, London with the first session taking place in 1921. There was a hiatus of more than twenty years in the early 1940s due to the Second World War, and it wasn't until in the 1960s that examinations resumed once again in Malaysia. Trinity College's long period of absence also witnessed the arrival of ABRSM in Malaysia. The first ABRSM examinations in Malaysia were conducted two years after World War II in 1947 (personal communication, Zulkanain Harun, 23 May, 2003). ABRSM's success in Malaysia has also attracted other foreign music examination boards to its shores, offering a wider array of choices to prospective candidates in

aspects of syllabus content, examination structure and offering. Apart from the ABRSM, there are five other major external music examination boards currently represented in Malaysia: The Trinity College of London, The Guildhall School of Music and Drama<sup>1</sup>, The London College of Music, Yamaha Music Foundation and most recently, The Australian Music Examination Board in 1997. Each of these individual examination boards offers a syllabus that is fundamentally based on a progressively graded system commensurate with the difficulty level of repertory and the demands of musicianship skills.

ABRSM's emergence as the largest and most popular music assessment board augurs well with the staggering number of examination entries each year. The Department of Examinations and Assessments in Penang provided anecdotal evidence that a total of 15,690 candidates enrolled in the ABRSM examination in the year 2000 with 91% of the candidates being pianists (personal communication, Zulkanain Harun, 23 May, 2003). Malaysia, together with Hong Kong and Singapore, ranks as ABRSM's top three international music examination clientele. ABRSM's burgeoning popularity is attributed to a well-managed administrative system, expedient marketing strategies and a high level of professionalism. This music examination board may be regarded as singularly unequalled in its impact on the development of music education in Malaysia.

The Associated Board's 2002 Annual Review reported a total of 607,544 examination entries outside of the United Kingdom; a notable increase of 7.5% as compared to the preceding year (2002: 27). Statistics offered by the Board's *2002 Annual Review* also indicated that this was the largest number of candidates ever recorded in the history of the Board, supporting the fact that ABRSM is the largest music examination body in the world.

### **Music Examination Structure of ABRSM**

ABRSM's primary objective is the provision of music assessments via a system of graded examinations at all musical levels. Examinations are offered in thirty-five instruments, including

singing, theory and practical musicianship without any age restrictions except for teaching diplomas. The level of difficulty progresses from Grade 1 to Grade 8 and then through the Advanced Certificate to the Licentiate and Fellowship diplomas. Each Grade comprises a “Practical” (performance) component and a corresponding “Theory” section of the same level. For example, candidates will take the Grade 5 Theory examination and subsequently the Grade 5 Practical examination. Both performance-based practical examinations and written examinations are conducted three times a year in the United Kingdom. The frequency by which these examinations are administered varies from country to country. The practical music examinations in Malaysia are offered once every year. These practical examinations usually take place between the months of June through August with the theory portion in early March.

A syllabus of repertoire and examinations guides the instruction from the elementary to advanced levels, at which the students become Associates, Licentiates or Fellows of the Royal Schools of Music. The Associated Board’s core operational activities can be categorized into four main components comprising:

1. Practical and Theory Music Examinations
2. Professional Development Courses
3. Workshops and Seminars
4. Publications

At the core of the Associated Board’s examination structure is a system of eight graded, externally marked examinations which sets a universal standard. There is no age limit and, as far as possible, students get the chance to prove what they have achieved in the course of their music lessons before specially trained examiners. To date, only Australia, Canada and New Zealand have devised anything similar to this system of music examinations. Students in the United States<sup>2</sup> and Europe who attend one-day-a-week music schools, or who are educated full-time at a conservatoire (more common in continental Europe) may well take part in the yearly exams,

organized by the institution to monitor progress. However, there is no such national system similar to the Associated Board's in operation.

At a glance, candidates are usually expected to prepare three pieces for each grade: one Baroque, one Classical, and one either from the Romantic or 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scales, Arpeggios, Aural Test together with a Sight Reading test are compulsory at all grades. The flow chart on the following page provides a general plan of the Board's examination structure and overall progression.

### **Piano Teachers and Students Demographic Information in Penang, Malaysia**

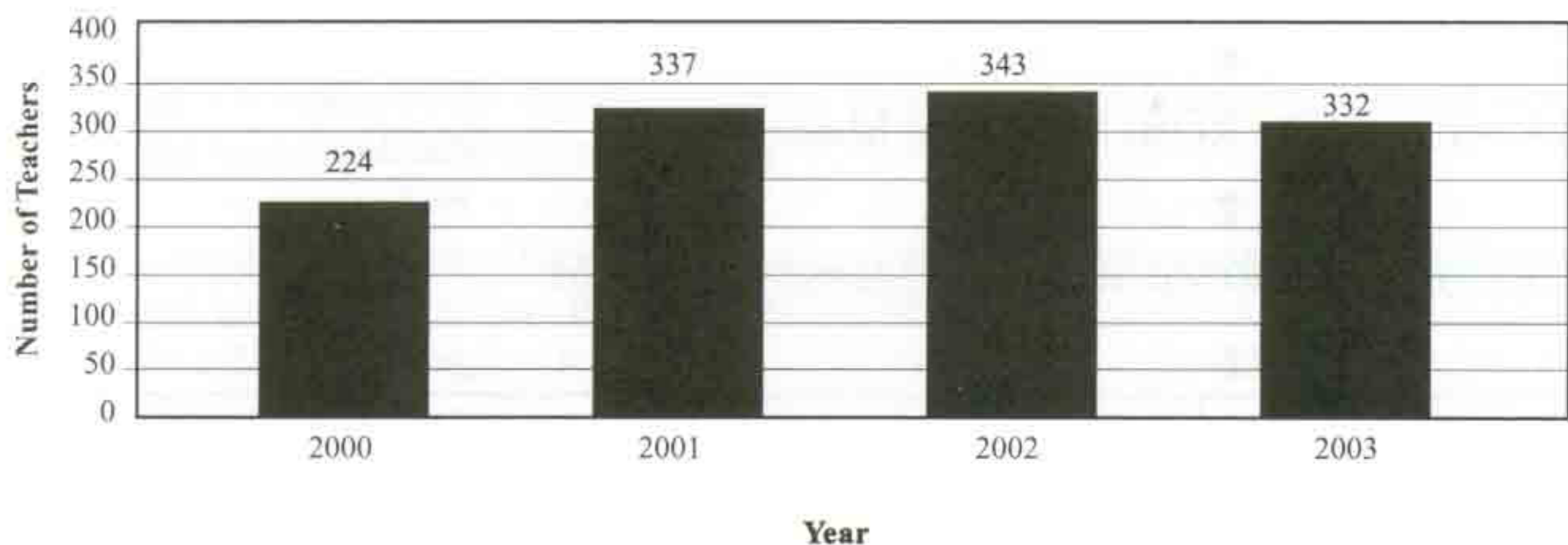
To better understand the current status of ABRSM's impact on piano instruction in Penang, it is of paramount importance to investigate both the quantitative and qualitative relationship between the Associated Board, piano teachers and students in Penang. To initiate this investigation, a written request was submitted to the Head of the Examination and Assessment Unit in Penang. This examination unit, a subsidiary of the Malaysian Ministry of Education is the Associated Board's local representative in Penang. This enabled the collection of information and data with regards to the number of piano teachers who enrolled students for the ABRSM practical examinations over a period of four years beginning from 2000 to 2003. The information obtained also included the results of the Graded and Diploma practical examinations (piano) for the period in question. The data obtained was converted into the five column charts in the following pages.



<b>DIPLOMA</b>	Subject / Specialization available in:
(Fellowship of Royal Schools of Music) <b>FRSM</b>	
↑	
(Licentiate of the Royal Schools of Music) <b>LRSM</b>	Directing Teaching Performing
↑	
(Diploma of the Royal Schools of Music) <b>DipARSM</b>	

<b>GRADED EXAMS</b>	
Grade 8	
↑	
Grade 7	
↑	
Grade 6*	<i>Candidates must pass Grade 5 or above in Theory, Practical Musicianship or solo Jazz subject before enrolling for the Grade 6 or above Practical exams.</i>
↑	
Grade 5	
↑	
Grade 4	
↑	
Grade 3	
↑	
Grade 2	
↑	
Grade 1	

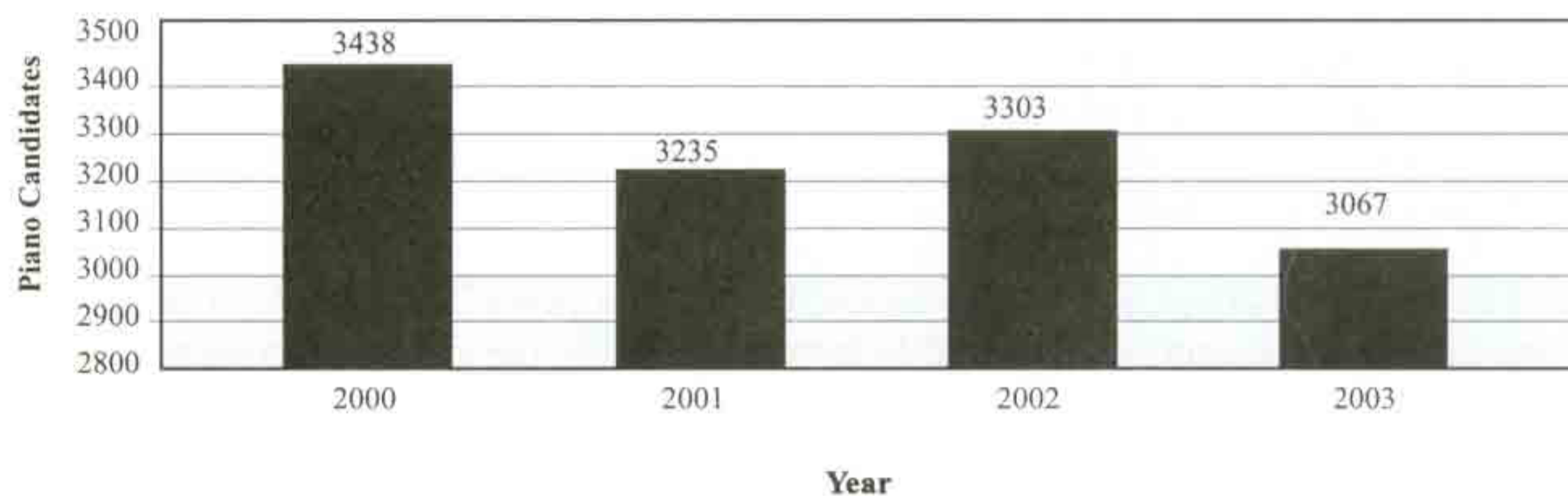
<p><b>PREPARATORY TEST*</b> <i>This test does not contain an awarded mark as a form of assessment as found in the other parts of the Diploma and graded exams. Designed for beginning students after 6–9 months of lessons, the prep test is used as preparation for the graded examinations.</i></p>
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**Chart 1. Number of Piano Teachers that enrolled students for the ABRSM practical examinations.**

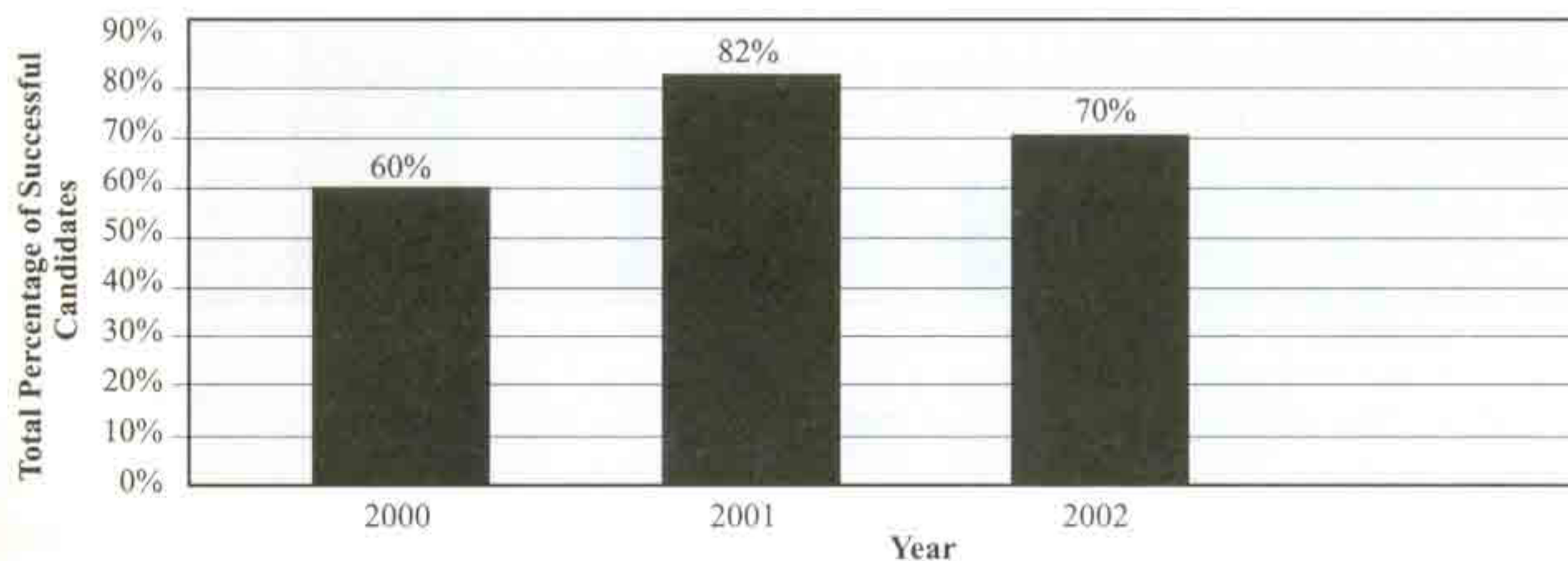
Chart 1 above indicates the number of teachers that enrolled students for the ABRSM practical examinations between the years 2000–2003. As the chart describes, there was a significant rise of 50.4% in the number of entries (n) from 224 to 337 between years 2000 and 2001. Years 2001–2003 did not reveal any significant difference in the number of teachers that entered students for the ABRSM practical examinations (2002: n=343; 2003: n=332).

Chart 2 illustrates the total number of candidates for Grades 1–8 (Practical) from years 2000–2003. As the chart indicates, there was a gradual decrease in the number of piano candidates for the graded practical examinations between the years 2000–2003 except for a negligible increase of 2.1% (n=68) between 2001 and 2002. The most significant decrease in the number of graded examination candidates was between the years 2002 to 2003 (2002: n=3303; 2003: n=3067). This significant drop is attributed to the increasing number of other external examination boards competing to gain a portion of the market share, which is virtually dominated by the ABRSM. Other factors that affected the drop in enrollment may be caused by a sluggish economic growth in the 2002 fiscal year.



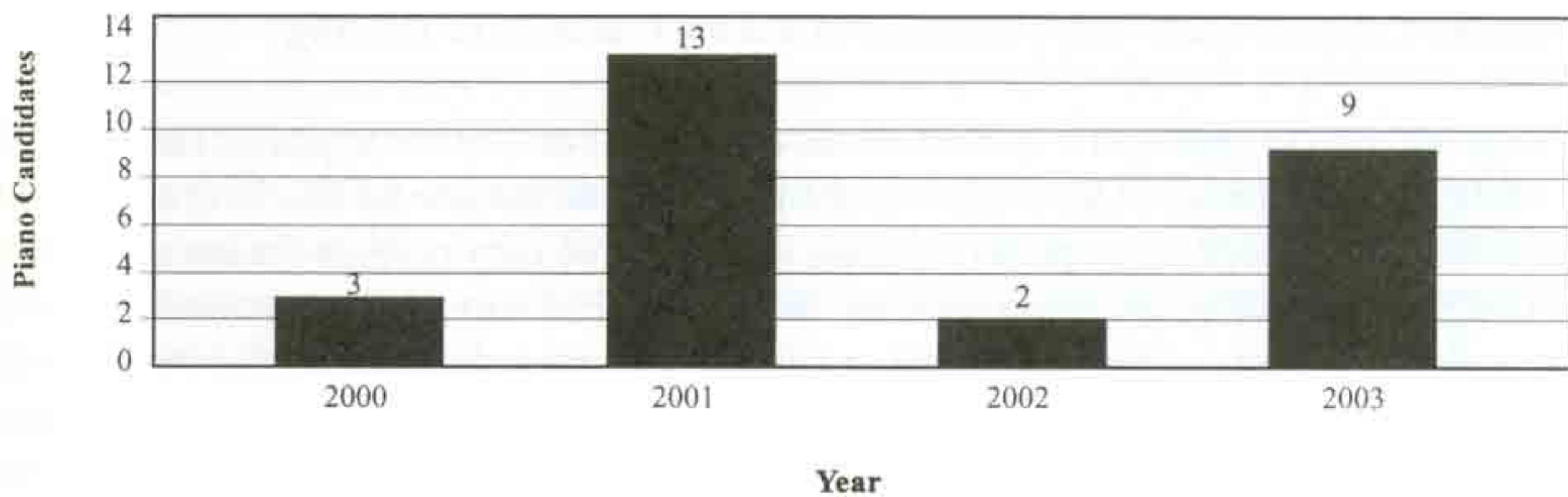
**Chart 2. Total number of piano candidates for Grades 1–8 (Practical) examinations from 2000–2003.**

Chart 3 indicates the results of examination candidates for the ABRSM practical examinations in Penang for years 2000–2002. (The Examination Unit was unable to furnish results for year 2003). As the chart indicates, 2001 was the most successful year with 82% passes at all levels of achievement (distinction, merit and regular pass). A significant drop of 12% in the number of passes was observed between years 2001–2002. The passing rate for year 2000 was only at 60% with a sizable total of approximately 1,400 candidates that failed their piano examination.

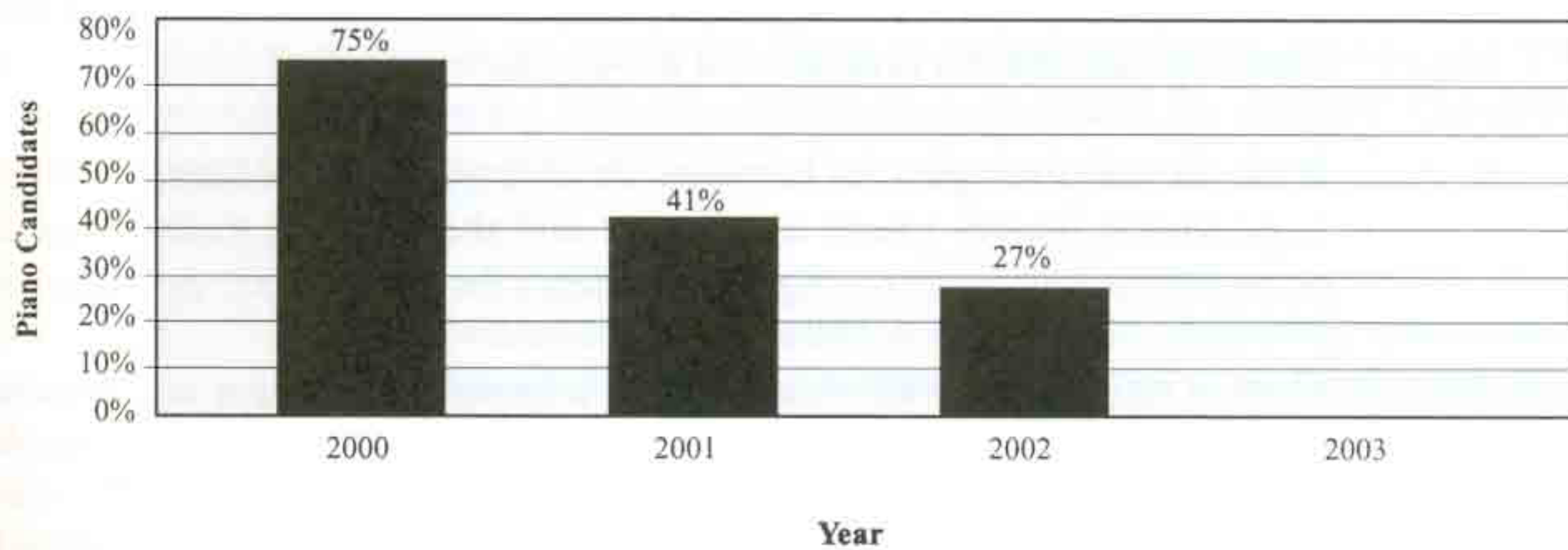


**Chart 3. Total percentage of successful candidates (pass, merit and distinction) for Grades 1–8 (Practical) for years 2000–2002.**

Chart 4 shows the number of diploma candidates for the years 2000–2003. The number of diploma candidates is usually considerably lower than that of the graded examinations. This is mainly due to the significant increase in the level of difficulty in these diploma exams and the demanding preparation time incurred upon the candidate. There was a noticeable increase from 3 entries in 2000 to 13 in 2001 due to the introduction of ABRSM's new diploma syllabus at the beginning of 2001. The new syllabus has received much positive feedback from teachers and potential candidates globally. ABRSM reported an encouraging feedback from teachers. "The breadth of the syllabus rooted in real world personal experience and the built-in flexibility, allowing candidates to play to their strengths, have been praised" (Power 2000: 7). However, the unsatisfactory passing rate of 41% in 2001 (see chart 5) has deterred many potential candidates from entering into these diploma examinations in 2002.



**Chart 4. Total number of piano candidates for Diploma (Practical) examinations (2000–2003).**



**Chart 5. Total percentages of successful diploma piano candidates (distinction, merit and passes). No data reported for 2003.**

### **Survey on the Current State and Practices of Piano Teachers in Penang**

A study was initiated to survey the current status and practices of private piano instruction in Penang, Malaysia. The design of the study was formulated to determine the teaching approaches and instructional philosophies of piano teachers in Penang as they prepare students for entry into the ABRSM practical piano examinations. In addition, the survey also entailed a study of the views and impressions of piano teachers in Penang with regards to the Associated Board's practical examination syllabus. The specific research questions addressed by this study were the following:

1. What are the pedagogical approaches utilized by piano teachers in preparing their students for the practical examinations offered by the ABRSM?
2. What are the instructors' perception of ABRSM's practical piano examinations and it's professional development support?
3. What are the discrepancies between the objectives of the Associated Board in providing quality music assessment and the teaching methods used by piano instructors in preparing their students for these music examinations?

To facilitate collection of relevant data for this purpose, a survey instrument was created to elicit both qualitative and quantitative data from the following research areas: teaching experience, teaching materials, instructional practices and teaching philosophy. The survey was mailed to 200 piano teachers in Penang with an 80% return rate (n=160). The stratified sample population (by locality) was randomly chosen from an official directory of all piano teachers in the state of Penang (n=332) that have entered students for the ABRSM practical examinations in the year 2003. This comprehensive directory was obtained from the Penang Examination and Assessment Unit. The listing included teachers who have entered students at all levels of study (Grade 1 to Diploma). A stratified random sample (by locality) from the

directory was selected. To ensure confidentiality of the study subjects, qualitative and discriminatory measures were not used in the selection of the sample population, neither were the respondents asked to disclose their names in the survey. Descriptive analysis was employed to determine the statistical results obtained from the survey that were subsequently collated and processed using Microsoft Excel. Each survey question was derived and based upon the three original research inquiry stipulated.<sup>3</sup> The comprehensive structure of the survey addressed the following three areas:

**Section A.** The two questions from this section served two purposes. First, it aided in determining the criteria used by piano instructors in selecting pre Grade 1 instructional materials. The choice of teaching material is important as it lays the pedagogical foundation in which learning takes place. In the second question, teachers were asked to identify the subject areas that they would want to be presented at ABRSM's annual Teaching Seminars. The data collected for this question was important to ascertain the topics that teachers needed most help with in their teaching. Participants were instructed to (1) check on the appropriate responses, and (2) fill in the blanks provided for ranking based questions (See Appendix for results). The following were the two questions for Section A:

**A.1** Please use numbers 1 through 6 to rank the following statements that best represents the reasons when you choose a method book for your students.

**(Note: Use 1 for the most important reason and 6 for the least important reason).**

\_\_\_ I attended a workshop on using the method books.

\_\_\_ I had used the method books before when I was taking piano lessons.

- \_\_\_ **The method books are readily available in nearby music stores.**
- \_\_\_ **The method books are highly recommended by other teachers/colleagues.**
- \_\_\_ **The prices of the method books are reasonable and affordable.**
- \_\_\_ **The method books contain sufficient materials to prepare my students for the Grade 1 Practical Examination.**

**A.2 Please use numbers 1 through 9 to rank the following topics in terms of what piano teachers in Malaysia need to learn at the teaching seminars organized by ABRSM. (Note: Use 1 for the most important topic and 9 for the least important topic).**

- \_\_\_ **Introducing additional piano literature.**
- \_\_\_ **Interpretation of keyboard pieces based on periods and composers.**
- \_\_\_ **Piano performance practices and styles.**
- \_\_\_ **Developing piano technique.**
- \_\_\_ **Aural Test.**
- \_\_\_ **Music theory.**
- \_\_\_ **Music history.**
- \_\_\_ **Psychology of music.**
- \_\_\_ **Principles of teaching.**

**Section B.** This section required respondents to state their level of agreement to a list of statements. These statements pertain to the instructional practices employed by piano teachers with specific reference to the ABRSM examination syllabus. They were aimed at eliciting information pertaining to instructional practices adopted in the piano studio. While the practice of adopting effective teaching techniques is indispensable, the research questions also surveyed whether the Board's syllabus requirements was adhered by the instructors. A total of 22



statements (11 are selectively shown here) were presented in this section. The range of choice options comprising four levels of frequency is as follows: **1. Never, 2. Seldom, 3. Frequently, 4. Very Frequently.** A general mean on the Likert scale 4 was calculated and used to provide an overall interpretation of the data collected for each question. The following were the questions found in Section B:

- B.1 My students count aloud when they play.**
- B.2 I count aloud for my students when they play.**
- B.3 My students also work on other pieces apart from their examination pieces.**
- B.4 I use the metronome to teach scales and arpeggios.**
- B.5 I teach sight-reading even after students have completed their practical examinations.**
- B.6 I try to make all my students listen to the ABRSM recordings of the examination pieces before they begin learning them.**
- B.7 I explain the title of the pieces to my students before they begin learning them.**
- B.8 I teach aural and ear training in the piano lesson.**

- B.9 I teach aural and ear training even after the students have completed the practical examinations.**
- B.10 I allocate time for teaching sight-reading.**
- B.11 I research into the background of the examination pieces before I teach them to my students.**

**Section C.** In this section questions were asked on the teaching philosophies and approaches, including teachers' views, attitude and impression of the Associated Board's practical examinations and syllabi. A total of 14 statements (3 shown here) were presented, to which teachers were asked to respond by indicating their level of agreement to each one. The range of choice options comprising four levels of agreement was as follows: **1.** Strongly Agree, **2.** Agree **3.** Disagree, **4.** Strongly Disagree. A general mean on the Likert scale was calculated and used to provide an overall interpretation of the data collected for each question. Section C questions were:

- C.1 To begin learning a piece of music, a student has to practice using separate hands.**
- C.2 Incorporating music theory such as harmonic analysis in teaching practical examination pieces is important.**
- C.3 ABRSM does not provide sufficient professional development courses for piano teachers.**

## **Discussion of Survey Results**

The research questions contained in the survey distributed are displayed in bold and each is followed by the results. The results presented in the respective tables are not quantitatively ranked but instead conform to the order listed in the survey instrument.

### **Results for Section A.**

- A.1 Method Book Selection. Rank in order of importance:**
- I attended a workshop on using the method books.**
  - I had used the method books before when I was taking piano lessons.**
  - The method books are readily available in nearby music stores.**
  - The method books are highly recommended by other teachers/colleagues.**
  - The prices of the method books are reasonable and affordable.**
  - The method books contain sufficient materials to prepare my students for the Grade 1 Practical Examination.**

Survey question A.1 was concerned with the criteria selections used by piano teachers when a method book is first assigned to a student in the piano lesson. The selection criteria used indicated the key factors that are most important to teachers when choosing a method book for their students. Of the six selection criteria used in choosing a method book for their students, a total of 82 (50.61%) of teachers surveyed ranked adequacy of preparation material for the Grade 1 exam as most important. This anecdotal evidence supports the assumption that music instruction in Malaysia is primarily geared towards an examination-oriented schema and ethos that permeates through the fabric of a procedural educational system. 26.25% (n=42) teachers ranked the support workshops offered by method book publishers as the second most important

reason in choosing a particular method series. These support workshops play a significant role not only in inculcating teachers to the direct and fringe benefits of using a particular a method book but also serve as an effective vehicle for marketing endeavors by the publishing company.

**A.2 Ranking of topics in terms of what piano teachers in Malaysia need to learn at the teaching seminars organized by ABRSM.**

- \_\_\_ **Introducing additional piano literature.**
- \_\_\_ **Interpretation of keyboard pieces based on periods and composers.**
- \_\_\_ **Piano performance practices and styles.**
- \_\_\_ **Developing piano technique.**
- \_\_\_ **Aural Test.**
- \_\_\_ **Music theory.**
- \_\_\_ **Music history.**
- \_\_\_ **Psychology of music.**
- \_\_\_ **Principles of teaching.**

Survey question A.2 was concerned with the subject areas that piano teachers in Penang would want to be presented at the ABRSM seminars. A list of nine subject areas was listed on the survey which respondents were asked to rank in order of preference. The data collected was useful to identify the needs of Penang piano teachers in the aspects of professional development (see appendix). A total of 28 (17.5%) teachers ranked the “Interpretation of keyboard pieces based on period and composer” and “Principles of Teaching” respectively as the two most important subject areas that should be presented at ABRSM seminars. Least favored was the area of music theory with 28 (17.5%) respondents who felt that music theory should be left out in future teaching support seminars. In the second ranking column, “Piano Performance Practices and Styles” received the most number of responses (n=26, 16.25%), followed by 22 (13.75%) for “Interpretation of keyboard pieces based on period and composer.” The statistics indicated a strong inclination or preference towards performance-based topics as opposed to theoretical-based subject areas.

**Results for Section B.****B.1 My students count aloud when they play.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	16	10.0
Seldom	80	50.0
Frequently	36	22.5
Very Frequently	8	5.0

**Table 1. Number and percentage of teachers that use the metronome in their teaching.**

Research question B.1 was concerned with the issue of students counting aloud in the piano lesson. More than half ( $n=96$ , 60.0%) of the teachers responded that their students either seldom or never counted aloud as they play at the piano. The Likert scale recorded a frequency level of “never”, situated at a mean rating of 1.93 in the issue of students counting aloud as they play. Although the practice of counting aloud is not the absolute path to developing rhythmic security, the ability to count is an indispensable tool in paving the way to achieving this goal (Uzler et al. 2000: 8).

**B.2 I count aloud for my students when they play.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	4	2.5
Seldom	36	22.5
Frequently	72	45.0
Very Frequently	46	28.8

**Table 2. Number and percentage of teachers that count aloud for their students while teaching.**

Survey question B.2 was concerned with the issue of teachers counting aloud for their students in the piano lesson. On the Likert scale the mean rating was 2.22, indicating a “seldom” frequency level. Most teachers (n=118, 73.0%) concurred that they frequently or very frequently counted for their students in the piano lesson. Passive counting reinforcements through a secondary source may not inculcate rhythmic security or comprehension on the part of the recipient. This is supported by the fact that many method books encourage students to count aloud rather than having the instructor do so.

**B.3 My students also work on other pieces apart from their examination pieces.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	0	0
Seldom	110	68.8
Frequently	26	23.7
Very Frequently	24	15.0

**Table 3. Number and percentage of teachers that work on other repertoire apart from those set for the ABRSM examination.**

Survey question B.3 was asked to determine the frequency by which non-examination repertoire is taught in the piano lesson. A total of 110 (68.8%) teachers seldom taught non-examination repertoire. This indicates there is a general lack of exposure to music beyond the scope of the set exam pieces. In fact, ABRSM encourages teachers to explore a wide variety of repertoire, especially those outside of the exam syllabus (Crozier et al. 2000: 113). The low Likert scale rating of 2.47 also indicated a “seldom” frequency level.

**B.4 I use the metronome to teach scales and arpeggios.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	38	23.7
Seldom	88	55.0
Frequently	26	16.2
Very Frequently	10	6.2

**Table 4. Number and percentage of teachers that use the metronome in their teaching.**

In survey question B.4, teachers were asked to determine whether the metronome was used as a tool to teach scales and arpeggios in the piano lesson. The Board specifies recommended minimum tempi for various categories of the scale and arpeggio portion of the examination. Although the minimum speeds stipulated in the scales and arpeggio requirements are only rough guides, it is imperative to understand that the issue of tempo is one of the assessment criteria used in this section of the exam. More than half of the surveyed population (n=126, 78.7%) did not use the metronome when teaching scales and arpeggios. This is indicative of an indifferent attitude on the part of the instructor in meeting the syllabus requirements set by ABRSM.

**B.5 I teach sight-reading even after students have completed their practical examinations.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	6	3.8
Seldom	98	61.3
Frequently	40	25.0
Very Frequently	18	11.3

**Table 5. Number and percentage of teachers that continued to include sight-reading activities in the piano lesson after the ABRSM practical exams.**

Survey question B.5 was concerned with the number of teachers that include sight-reading in the piano lesson as a year-long activity as opposed to including it only prior to the practical examination. In this case, a total of 104 (65.1%) of respondents either seldom or never taught sight-reading after the practical exams are over. The importance and benefits in establishing a regular sight-reading practice time is paramount and cannot be over emphasized (Crozier 2000: 46).

**B.6 I try to make all my students listen to the ABRSM recordings of the examination pieces before they begin learning them.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	34	21.3
Seldom	66	41.3
Frequently	48	30.0
Very Frequently	14	8.8

**Table 6. Number and percentage of teachers that encourage students to listen to the ABRSM recordings of examination pieces before the learning process begins.**



Survey question B.6 was concerned with the number of teachers that encouraged students to listen to the ABRSM recording of examination pieces prior to teaching them. One hundred (62.6%) teachers either seldom or never encouraged students to listen to these recordings, while sixty-two (38.8%) either frequently and very frequently encouraged students to listen to recordings of their examination pieces. ABRSM produces recordings of these exam pieces annually with the purpose of providing a guide for both student and teachers to the style and performance practices of selected repertoire from the set examination list. However, there exists an underlying danger of misusing this invaluable learning aid as students may entirely measure their own success in performance based on one specific interpretation of the music. Due to the subjective nature of musical interpretation, it is of great importance that the students develop an individual performing style of their own; an obligation and responsibility incumbent upon the instructor.

**B.7 I explain the title of the pieces to my students before they begin learning them.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	0	0
Seldom	66	41.3
Frequently	52	32.5
Very Frequently	44	27.5

**Table 7. Number and percentage of teachers that explain the title of the examinations pieces to their students before begin teaching them.**

Teachers were asked if they explained the title of the examination pieces to their students before they began teaching them. Sixty-six (41.3%) seldom explained the title of the examination pieces to their students while fifty-two (32.5%) frequently explained the title of the examinations pieces to their students before teaching them. Forty-four (27.5%) very frequently explained

the title of the examination pieces to their students before teaching them. On a Likert scale of 1–4, the mean rating was 2.9, which was within the “seldom” frequency level.

**B.8 I teach aural and ear training in the piano lesson.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	4	2.5
Seldom	94	58.8
Frequently	46	28.8
Very Frequently	18	11.3

**Table 8. Number and percentage of teachers that teach aural and ear training in the piano lesson.**

Survey question B.8 was concerned with the number of teachers that taught aural training in the piano lesson. The results indicated that four (2.5 %) of the respondents never taught aural and ear training in the piano lesson. Ninety-four (58.8%) seldom taught aural and ear training in the piano lesson. Forty-six (28.8%) frequently taught aural and ear training in the piano lesson. Eighteen (11.3%) very frequently taught aural and ear training in the piano lesson. On a Likert scale of 1–4, the mean rating was 2.5.

**B.9 I teach aural and ear training even after the students have completed the practical examinations.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	18	11.3
Seldom	92	57.5
Frequently	38	23.8
Very Frequently	14	8.7

**Table 9. Number and percentage of teachers that continue to teach aural and ear training as an all-year activity.**

Survey question B.9 was concerned with the number of teachers that continue to include aural and ear-training activities even after the practical examinations are over for the year. Developing the ability both to listen and to hear perceptively requires a consistent and year-round inclusion of aural training as an integral part of a well-balanced piano lesson. Even if aural skills are taught in the piano lesson, this usually occurs just prior to the examination date. In addition, it is interesting to note that most aural training ceased to continue once the practical exams were over. A high percentage of teachers (68.8%), as shown in Table 9, of the surveyed population either seldom or never taught aural skills after the practical examinations.

**B.10 I allocate time for teaching sight-reading.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	0	0
Seldom	94	58.7
Frequently	52	32.5
Very Frequently	14	8.7

**Table 10. Number and percentage of teachers that allocate time for sight reading in the piano lesson.**

Survey question B.10 was concerned with the allocation of time for sight-reading activity in the piano lesson. More than half (n=94, 58.7%) of teachers seldom allocated time for sight-reading in the piano lesson. Statistics recorded a rating on the Likert scale of 2.5 that is well within the “seldom” frequency level.

**B.11 I research into the background of the examination pieces before I teach them to my students.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	0	0
Seldom	108	73.8
Frequently	20	12.5
Very Frequently	22	13.8

**Table 11. Number and percentage of teachers that conduct research into the background of ABRSM examination pieces prior to teaching them to students.**

Survey question B.11 was concerned with the number of teachers that researched into the background of the examination pieces before teaching those pieces to their students. More than half (n=108, 73.8%) of piano teachers seldom researched into the background of the pieces they taught, while twenty (12.5%) and twenty-two (13.8%) frequently and very frequently researched into the background of pieces they teach respectively. An investigation and inquiry into the pieces that are being taught is a mandatory and fundamental step that any responsible teacher should take to become an effective music instructor. However, the data recorded from this survey question did not indicate this is the current status and practice of piano teachers in Penang.

**C.1 To begin learning a piece of music, a student has to practice using separate hands.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	26	16.3
Agree	82	51.3
Disagree	46	28.8
Strongly Disagree	4	2.5

**Table 13. Piano teachers' response to hand separate practice at the beginning stage of learning a new piece of music.**

In research question C.1, teachers were asked their level of agreement on hands-separate practice at the beginning stages of learning a new piece of music. Eighty-two (51.3%) agreed on hands-separate practice at the beginning stage of learning a new piece of music, forty-six (28.8%) disagreed on hands-separate practice at the beginning stage of learning a new piece of music and four (2.5%) of the teachers strongly disagreed on hands-separate practice at the beginning stage of learning a new piece of music. Hands-separate practice should only be assigned occasionally, as there are inherent problems involved. Frances Clark states, "some music

needs to be worked out hands separately, but it is usually neither necessary nor desirable to continue to practice it that way. Hands-separate practice does not give the sound of the musical whole, and it skirts the difficulties of coordinating hands. Sometimes technical or rhythm problems seem to solve themselves when hands are played together.” (Clark 1998: 168).

**C.2 Incorporating music theory such as harmonic analysis in teaching practical examination pieces is important.**

Answers	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	4	2.5
Agree	62	38.8
Disagree	92	57.5
Strongly Disagree	0	0

**Table 14. Number and percentage of piano teachers views on the importance of incorporating music theory in the teaching of examination repertoire.**

Survey question C.2 was concerned with the views expressed by piano teachers pertaining to the importance of incorporating music theory (e.g. harmonic analysis) in the teaching of examination repertoire. Four (2.5%) of the teachers strongly agreed that it was important to incorporate music theory when teaching examination repertoire, sixty-two (38.8%) agreed that it was important to incorporate music theory when teaching examination repertoire, ninety-two (57.5%) disagreed that it was important to incorporate music theory when teaching examination repertoire, and none (0%) of the teachers strongly disagreed that it was important to incorporate music theory when teaching examination repertoire. Surprisingly, the survey indicated that more than half of the piano teachers did not acknowledge the importance of incorporating theory while teaching the examination pieces. Anna Butterworth, an ABRSM panel presenter

advocated the inclusion of theory in the learning of a piece. Butterworth expressed that a holistic approach that fuses both theory and practice aids in an interpretation that stylistically respects the composer's wishes (Power 1999: 9).

### **C.3 ABRSM does not provide sufficient professional development courses for piano teachers.**

<b>Answers</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Strongly Agree	20	12.5
Agree	108	67.5
Disagree	30	18.8
Strongly Disagree	0	0

**Table 15. Number and percentage of piano teachers responses to the insufficient provision of professional development support by ABRSM.**

Survey question C.3 was concerned with the views expressed by piano teachers pertaining to the professional development courses offered by the Board. Twenty (12.5%) of the teachers strongly agreed that ABRSM does not provide sufficient professional development support, one hundred and eight (67.5%) agreed that ABRSM does not provide sufficient professional development support, thirty (18.8%) disagreed that ABRSM does not provide sufficient professional development support, and none (0%) of the teachers strongly disagreed that ABRSM does not provide sufficient professional development support. It can be construed that the majority of piano teachers in Penang are in need of more professional courses to be offered by the Associated Board.

### **Conclusion**

Private piano teaching is generally peripatetic in Penang as well as throughout Malaysia, an activity which commonly takes place in either a home or private school setting. It can be

construed that private piano teaching is practically a domestic and private affair. Ross points out that this profession is still very much a cottage industry in view of the fact that many piano teachers do not consider this as a full-time profession (2002: 178). Virtually every private piano teacher in Malaysia operates in a private music education system that is dictated by the foreign external music examination boards. Thus, for many teachers, the responsibility of preparing students for external music examinations has singularly become the sole objective in piano instruction. For the student, piano lessons are synonymous to music examination, a phenomenon that conjures up a notion of two inseparable and indiscernible entities. Unlike other vocations such as medical science and accountancy, there is currently no professional body that sets the standard in music teaching or to monitor the teaching competency of private piano instructors. Teachers are left to their own discretion to freely utilize and adopt any teaching approach that they see appropriate which often triggers an attitude of complacency.

The survey has unveiled numerous incongruities in Penang's private piano teaching industry. It is clear from the data elucidated from the survey that there is a need for more stringent measures to be taken to raise the standard of piano teaching in Penang and perhaps throughout Malaysia. In essence, piano education in Malaysia is premised on a cycle of replication where teachers continue to teach in the same way they were taught. The majority of teachers appear to have misused the ABRSM syllabus and have utilized it as a curriculum for piano teaching instead. This is supported by the fact that more than half of the surveyed respondents do not teach any other pieces apart from those stipulated in the examination syllabus. Such a state of affairs in the piano teaching milieu may potentially deter many students from learning the piano. With such a limited quantity of music learned each year, it would hardly be a surprise if many students find piano lessons boring, uninteresting and unfulfilling.

Statistics from this study also reveal that there are discrepancies between the requirements and objectives of the practical examination syllabus with what is actually been practiced in the piano studio. Take for instance the use of the metronome in teaching scales and arpeggios. The



board has specifically indicated metronome markings as a useful guide in determining the minimum tempi required for each examination grade. However, almost 80% of the teachers in *the surveyed population hardly use the metronome while teaching scales and arpeggios.*

On the issue of aural training and sight-reading, more than half of the surveyed population do not continue to include these pertinent and indispensable exercises in the piano lesson. The mastery of aural and sight-reading skills is not only an essential factor in the attainment of sound musicianship, but also a potential source of a lifetime of musical enjoyment (Agay, 1981: 197).

Other outcomes as a result of these incongruities in music teaching include matters of scholarship development. The survey discovered that approximately 75% of the teachers assume an indifferent attitude of not conducting sufficient research into the background and historical aspects of the pieces they teach. Furthermore, 60% of the surveyed teachers fail to incorporate theoretical analysis in the teaching of repertoire. Theory often referred to as “the grammar of music” is a precondition of musical understanding and competence. The fundamentals of theory, incorporated in the piano lesson, assist in the development of functional skills such as harmonization, transposition, improvisation and sight-reading.

### **Postscript: The future of Piano Instruction in Penang**

French composer Jules Massenet once remarked that a piano teacher needs to know only four phrases to effectively operate as a piano teacher at the end of the nineteenth century: (1) “Bonjour, Mademoiselle”; (2) “Not so fast” (or “Not so slow”); (3) “Less pedal, please”; and (4) “Give my regards to your mother.” (Agay 1981: 1). As cuttngly facetious this statement may sound, it also clearly proves that the business of piano teaching is constantly evolving. It is undeniable that ABRSM, similar to the other external music examination boards, forms a useful milestone in the pursuit of musical excellence. It is undeniable that most pedagogical approaches are

premised upon a cycle of replication – we often teach the way we were taught. However, in the instance of the current status and practices of piano instruction in Penang, this premise of replication may precariously pose great concerns to the future of this profession. One archetypal example of this cycle of replication concerns the misuse of the music examination system. A quote by Crozier and Harris may very well describe the predicament in Penang’s piano teaching arena,

“Perhaps the most common problem occurs when pupils are fed a diet of exam material to the exclusion of anything else. The teacher who simply presents pupils with one exam after another will cause a kind of musical malnutrition, which in turn may well lead to a stunned musical growth.” (2000: 112).

With thousands of Malaysians of all ages taking these music examinations annually, a paradigm shift from all involved in the music industry may be necessary if the foundations of effective teaching were to be realized.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>On 31 March 2004, after more than 100 years of providing external examinations in the UK and overseas, the Guildhall School’s Examinations Service amalgamated with Trinity College London to form a unitary examinations board which will provide, under Trinity College London management, enhanced Trinity Guildhall examinations in Music, Drama, Dance and Speech in the UK and worldwide.

<sup>2</sup>The recently formed (2004), Royal American Conservatory Examinations, in association with Royal College of Music Examinations, a division of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, Canada, provides American students with nationwide opportunities for achievement and evaluation. Based on the curriculum of the renowned Canadian Royal Conservatory of Music, Royal American Conservatory Examinations serves students and teachers with an internationally recognized program of assessment.

<sup>3</sup> Some questions from the original survey are omitted at the discretion of the author since they do not pertain to the scope of this article.

<sup>4</sup> A Likert scale is an often used questionnaire format. It requests respondents to specify their level of agreement to each of a list of statements. A typical question using a five-point Likert scale might make a statement, then ask the respondents to indicate whether they:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

The results show an ordinal level of preference; numbers have an inherent order or sequence but do not correspond to a precise mathematical value.

Appendix 1. Results for Survey Question A.1 on Method Book Selection Criteria

<b>Method book selection criteria</b>	<b>Rank 1 %</b>	<b>Rank 2 %</b>	<b>Rank 3 %</b>	<b>Rank 4 %</b>	<b>Rank 5 %</b>	<b>Rank 6 %</b>
I attended a workshop on using the method books.	8 (4.93)	42 (26.25)	14 (8.64)	10 (6.17)	42 (25.92)	20 (12.50)
I had used the method books before when I was taking piano lessons.	8 (4.93)	16 (9.87)	24 (14.81)	18 (11.11)	14 (8.64)	58 (35.80)
The method books are readily available in nearby music stores.	2 (1.23)	20 (12.34)	40 (24.69)	24 (14.81)	30 (18.51)	24 (14.81)
The method books are highly recommended by other teachers/colleagues.	32 (19.75)	28 (17.28)	28 (17.28)	36 (22.22)	12 (7.40)	2 (1.23)
The prices of the method books are reasonable and affordable.	6 (3.70)	30 (18.51)	18 (11.11)	34 (20.98)	32 (19.75)	18 (11.11)
The method books contain sufficient materials to prepare my students for the Grade 1 Practical Examination.	82 (50.61)	14 (8.64)	14 (8.64)	16 (9.87)	8 (4.93)	4 (2.46)

**Number and percentage of teachers indicating method book selection criteria**

Appendix 2. Results for survey question A.2 concerning the subject areas that piano teachers in Penang would want to be presented at the ABRSM seminars.

Seminar Topics	Rank 1 %	Rank 2 %	Rank 3 %	Rank 4 %	Rank 5 %	Rank 6 %	Rank 7 %	Rank 8 %	Rank 9 %
Introducing additional piano literature	4 (2.5)	-	4 (2.5)	12 (7.5)	24 (15.0)	6 (3.75)	14 (8.75)	6 (3.75)	18 (11.25)
Interpretation of keyboard pieces based on periods and composers.	28 (17.5)	22 (13.75)	14 (8.75)	8 (5.0)	8 (5.0)	-	6 (3.75)	2 (1.25)	-
Piano Performances practices and styles	12 (7.5)	26 (16.25)	18 (11.25)	20 (12.5)	4 (2.5)	2 (1.25)	2 (1.25)	-	4 (2.5)
Developing piano technique	8 (5.0)	20 (12.5)	24 (15.0)	10 (6.25)	6 (3.75)	8 (5.0)	8 (5.0)	4 (2.5)	-
Aural Test	-	4 (2.5)	2 (1.25)	8 (5.0)	16 (10.0)	10 (6.25)	20 (10.0)	24 (15.0)	8 (5.0)
Music Theory	6 (3.75)	-	4 (2.5)	-	6 (3.75)	4 (2.5)	12 (7.5)	26 (16.25)	28 (15.0)
Music History	2 (1.25)	2 (1.25)	2 (1.25)	8 (5.0)	-	28 (15.0)	16 (10.0)	12 (7.5)	18 (11.25)
Psychology of Music	2 (1.25)	6 (3.75)	10 (6.25)	8 (5.0)	16 (10.0)	18 (11.25)	10 (6.25)	8 (5.0)	10 (6.25)
Principles of Teaching	28 (15.0)	8 (5.0)	8 (5.0)	14 (8.75)	10 (6.25)	10 (6.25)	4 (2.5)	4 (2.5)	2 (1.25)

Number and percentage of teachers' topic preferences at ABRSM seminars.

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