

*Gordon Lawrie*  
*The Piano*  
*Exam*



# THE PIANO EXAM

*Gordon Lawrie*

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“Hello?”

“Is Mary Maxwell-Hume there?”

“Speaking. How can I help you?” The voice at the other end of the line has an English accent, educated, certainly not working class.

“Do you give piano lessons?”

“That rather depends. Who are the lessons for?”

“Me.”

“And you are? I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve introduced myself. My name’s Brian Reid and I’m looking for a couple of piano lessons.”

“Just two? It usually takes a little longer than that,” the voice replies drily.

A good start, I think. This woman does sardonic, it seems. Don’t encourage her, I think inwardly. “I was given your name by a friend. I was hoping you might be able to help me.”

“Which friend?” the voice asks.

“Joe Mackay.” I want to call him ‘Little’ Joe Mackay because that’s what his brother – and my best man – has always called him, but I manage to stop myself.

“You mean that pathetic ironmonger with the shop in Morningside?”

I don’t know how to reply to this. Joe does indeed have an ironmongery shop at the foot of Morningside Road in Edinburgh’s Southside, but I don’t normally like to acknowledge that he’s ‘pathetic’ to perfect strangers. Actually, he *is* pretty pathetic, but I decide not to acknowledge this for the moment.

“You remember Joe?”

“I remember Joseph Mackay, yes. Good address, Merchiston Terrace, as I recall.”

“That’s the one.”

“Far too heavy on the left hand. No sense of rhythm on the right.”

This is alarming. Does she discuss all of her pupils with perfect strangers?

“Do you discuss all of your pupils with perfect strangers?” I ask.

“Only the execrable ones. But I succeeded with Joseph.”

“You did?”

“I persuaded him to sell his piano. He had a Bechstein Grand which belonged in better hands. Advised him to try another instrument.”

“Such as?”

“A sat-nav. Any noise it makes is beyond his control.”

Wow. To think this woman was recommended to me by Joe Mackay himself. I need to update her, however.

“Joe only partially followed your advice,” I inform her.

“Oh?” It comes out as a low growl.

“He sold his Bechstein, but he bought a guitar instead.”

“Not a sat-nav?”

“He had one already, as it happened. In his VW Passat. Although I’ve never seen him use it, now that I think about it.” I pause for a moment, then add, “Perhaps he can’t get it in tune.” It’s meant to be a joke, trying to lighten the conversation.

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“I don’t suppose he *was* able to tune a sat-nav,” the woman suggests to me. She goes on. “Please tell me it’s not one of those awful electric guitar things he’s bought. They’re so *crude and indelicate*.”

“Indeed it is, Ms. Maxwell-Hume.”

“With a stupidly loud amplifier?” She’s pleading for a good answer.

“Afraid so.”

“In which case the whole world will hear how unmusical he actually is. Perhaps I should have encouraged him more in his piano playing. At least he didn’t have one of those awful electric keyboard things.” Oh dear, I think, but that can wait a while.

“I’ve never heard Joe, either on the piano or on guitar,” I tell her. “He might be better than me.”

“That would be good for his ego. He’d then only be the second-worst musician I’ve ever heard. However, I’m sure you didn’t call me to discuss Joseph. You would like me to give you two piano lessons?”

“I didn’t *literally* mean two. But I don’t need too many.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Mary Maxwell-Hume replies down the phone. Ouch. “What are your aims, Mr. Reid?”

Now this is one I’m ready for, because I happen to be a teacher, a depute headteacher in fact, so I know all about ‘aims and objectives’. Aims and objectives are things you claim to have thought about before you start, are working towards, and are usually far removed from where you end up.

“I’d like to pass a piano exam,” I tell her. “Grade Three.”

“Why Grade Three?” Mary Maxwell-Hume asks.

“Well... Actually, I’m not sure why I’m doing Grade Three, except that it seems to be the grade my school pupils all seem to try. I don’t want to be doing simpler stuff than them, frankly. I couldn’t live it down.”

“Hmm,” she replies. “We shall see. So you’re a teacher too? And what kind of piano do *you* have, Mr. Reid?”

I pause, take a deep breath, then tell her. “A Technics SX PC-26.” Actually, it’s my pride and joy.

There’s a long silence at the other end of the line, then a low growling noise.

“That doesn’t sound like any make of piano I’ve ever heard of, Mr. Reid.”

“It’s an electric piano,” I confess.

“There are pianos and electric keyboards,” she insists. “You seem to have one of the latter.”

“I understand you don’t like them, but I live in a flat and it’s only fair on the neighbours given that I’m not very good.”

For some reason this show of humility seems to soften her. “Ah well,” she says, “I suppose the Good Lord sends me all sorts. If you work, you’d probably like an early evening time, on your way home. I can fit you in on Thursday at six.”

“Oh yes, thank you, Ms. Maxwell-Hume. I’ll look forward to it.” It’s relief, rather than pleasure, which makes me say that. In truth I wish I’d never phoned at all.

“So will I, Mr. Reid. Let’s hope we don’t disappoint each other, shall we? I charge thirty pounds per lesson, by the way,” and then she gives me directions to her house.

Almost as an afterthought, she asks, “Have you had lessons before, Mr. Reid?”

Have I had lessons before? Have I had lessons before? Oh yes.

The first piano teacher I had was actually a teacher at my school, a woman called Lex who was the head of the music department. We had a nice relationship, but I was limited to doing lessons in school, at lunchtime or at the end of the day, and neither of us was really in a position to give it our fullest commitment. Besides, she felt uncomfortable charging me anything like the going rate, and we were both aware that I was also her line manager in the school. How could she tell her boss that he’s a waste of space on the piano? How could she give me a ticking off for not doing enough practice ten minutes after I’ve had a go at her for being late for her class (as she often was). We got on great, but our friendships at work were too precious to both of us to allow them to be spoiled over such trivia as piano lessons. As Lex herself put it, “this is too delicate, Brian.” Then she gave me a kiss on the cheek and a hug, and that was that.

And so I sought out professional help from the traditional sources – postcards in newsagents’ shops, ads on the internet, and of course classified adverts in the local newspapers. Edinburgh – where I live in a basement flat very near to the West End, by the way – has only one local paper, the *Edinburgh Evening News*, but it has other freebies, or at least it did then – *The Herald and Post*, and – on the buses – *The Metro*. The *Evening News* offered just one option, an older, middle-class woman called Yvonne who gave over thirty lessons per week in her own home, far too close to my school. She was nice, but at work I kept hearing whispered tales of my excruciatingly bad playing. I needed more privacy than she could offer.

I found Dave through his website. Dave was a tall, incredibly thin man with thick glasses, a shaven head, an accent halfway between Essex and Edinburgh, and a pronounced lisp. He might have been gay. On my first visit, he asked me to play something – anything – so that he could judge my ability, at the conclusion of which he asked me what I would *like* to be able to play. When I replied, “I really like Bach”, he replied “So do I, which is why I will never allow someone as bad as you to go anywhere near his music.” That ended my only lesson with Dave.

Martin was a student at Edinburgh university. He wasn’t a music student, you understand, and he had no qualifications at all, but he played keyboards in an electronica band and was looking to supplement his student loan by giving lessons. He was the only teacher I had whose face didn’t collapse on hearing that I possessed a Technics SX PC-26; he was also the only teacher who insisted that I learn to play the piano (or keyboard) standing up. (“It’s how any modern band plays it, man. Sitting at a keyboard is so *out*.”) Although he was prepared to teach me piano how to play the piano with one-finger – the left hand was for waving, punching the air, and blowing kisses to the crowd – I decided that he and I weren’t quite on the same wavelength.

Then one Sunday I was walking back from the Stockbridge market when I noticed a couple of pink notices tied to a lamp-posts in a side street. Assuming they were there to announce a road closure or an increase in parking charges, I stopped to have a look, only to discover the following:

**PIANO LESSONS  
EXPERIENCED TEACHER  
GUARANTEED SUCCESS**

And then followed the name and telephone number of Mary Maxwell-Hume.

So now, four days later, I'm on my way to her house. I confess I'm a little intrigued by the woman's 'guaranteed success' claim – I'll be testing that to the limit. On reflection, setting my aims and objectives at passing Grade Three piano is the equivalent of trying to scale Everest without ropes.

Mary Maxwell-Hume lives in a quiet terraced villa in the Trinity area in the north of Edinburgh, and I'm forced to park my green Honda Jazz at the end of her street and walk back some distance on foot to her house. I'm relieved that there's no sign of life as I make my way up the path to her front door. Ringing the bell produces no sound and no response, so I ring it again, longer this time in the hope of hearing myself, and my finger is still attached to the buzzer when the door opens. As soon as the door opens I can hear a doorbell ringing – loudly – in another room. Ah – that must be me, I think, and sure enough removing my finger causes the noise to stop.

"Sorry," I say. "I thought the bell was broken."

"Well, it's not," the woman before me replies. That's all she says.

Whatever I was expecting my new piano teacher to look like, this wasn't it. She's tall – with the benefit of the three steps up into her house she towers above me. I'm guessing she's around fifty, although she could be as old as me and simply looking young for her age, slim and with hair that contains colour and streaks of silver, and I can't tell how much is her own. She's wearing a dress, not any ordinary dress, but a blue calf-length lace thing that accentuates every sinewy curve of her figure from top to toe. She has discreetly-dangling earrings, she's barefoot, and she's wearing a sizeable quantity of some sort of perfume which doesn't make me feel sick, and so therefore is probably expensive. It might be Chanel No. 5, now that I think about it.

I must have been staring open-mouthed at this apparition for almost ten seconds when she finally says, "I assume you *are* Mr. Reid?" There might be the faintest trace of a Mona Lisa smile there.

"Yes." It's all I can manage. Then I remember my manners. "Ms. Maxwell-Hume?"

"You've come to the correct place, Mr. Reid. But unless you plan on having your lesson in my front garden, I'd suggest you come in. Please leave your shoes at the front door." As I remove my shoes, I'm at once both grateful that I put clean socks on before I left home, and curious how I'll deal with the piano pedals.

"Come through with me to the piano room." I follow her into a large south-facing room which backs onto a conservatory and then an extensive back garden which is bathed in the summer sunlight. In the centre of the room are a couple of large traditional sofas, and looking behind me, I spot a full-size grand piano, which I suspect might be the focus of today's activities. She motions me to sit down on one of the sofas, then to my surprise she opts to sit at the other end of the same one.

She studies me. "Do you like what you see?" she asks.

Mary Maxwell-Hume has put the question in the oddest way, especially as she waits until I'm looking directly at her until she asks.

"Yes," I reply, deciding to keep my options as far open as possible. "Beautiful."

“Call me Mary, Mr. Reid.”

“My name’s Brian,” I reply. “Brian Reid.”

“Well, Brian, this is where I give my piano lessons. And you would like to do a Grade Three exam, you say?”

“That’s the idea,” I assure her.

“Then I’m sure you’ll succeed. In fact I guarantee it.”

“You do?”

“Trust me, Brian,” she says firmly. “But first I need to hear what you can do, to get some idea of the task ahead.” I’m supposed to be the schoolteacher, but she’s the one who’s in control.

“How much did you say you charged?” I ask, just to be sure.

“The standard – thirty pounds.” She pauses. “For fifteen minutes.”

“*What?* Other teachers charge that for thirty minutes.”

“They’re not as good as me. I may seem expensive, but I guarantee success.”

I try to take this in. “Do I get all my money back if I fail?”

“Of course. But you won’t fail.”

“You haven’t heard me yet. I’m not very good,” I tell her.

“Which is why you really ought to start playing,” she says quietly. “You’ll be paying for my time, whether you play or not.” It’s slightly sinister.

“So no coffee and biscuits beforehand?” I ask. I was looking forward to a Kit-Kat or a Blue Riband. All my other teachers have had some sort of welcome routine.

“No coffee and biscuits.”

She instructs me to play. For those who have never had a piano lesson as an adult, it’s a sweat-inducingly nerve-wracking experience, and this woman has the palms of my hands utterly awash already – the soles of my feet, too. I make a note to try not to slip on her sanded wooden floor, but the bright summer light flooding in from the garden shows my footprints as I walk. It’s a relief to reach the safety of the piano stool before I faint with fear.

“I see you’ve brought some music with you, Brian. Is this what you’ve been playing?”

It’s the music from the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music – the gold standard of music exams – Grade Three. I nod my head. “I’ve been trying to play a couple of the pieces,” I tell her, but omitting the words “...for over a year.”

“Play for me,” she commands, with a wave. She’s still not risen from the sofa. “Perhaps you should start by playing a couple of scales for me. Would you like that? Do you practise scales, Brian? I do hope so.”

The answers to those two questions are “no” and “very little” respectively, but neither of those is the correct answers, so I simply reply, “Where would you like me to start?”

“How about the key of C?”

In theory, this should be the easiest of all the keys on the piano, played as it is on all the white notes, although personally I’ve always found it slightly more reassuring to have the odd black note to say hello to on the way up and down. In my sweaty hands, I make a complete mess of the key of C.

“Can I try again?” I ask. “I’m a little nervous.” She nods, but in fact the second attempt is worse, and the third worse still after that.

“The key of C can be a little tricky, Brian,” she says, coolly. “How about G?”

G is a little better. There’s only one black note, but it helps. At Grade Three level, I only have to play two octaves, I remind myself. On the other hand, that’s sixty notes, which I have to play in the right order and on a mixture of two hands.

Next I stumble through D, then A minor. Then she drops the nuclear bomb on me.

“Play E flat, please.”

E flat is a complete nightmare of a key on the piano, requiring the player to engineer a thumb movement only really suited to animals with a surfeit of fingers. It takes me almost thirty seconds to work my way up the two octaves of E flat and back down again.

“Hmm,” she says. I can’t really bring myself to think of her as “Mary”. “Perhaps scales are not your strongest suit, Brian.”

“In terms of the piano, perhaps I’m more likely to apply clubs and spades than hearts and diamonds,” I suggest. It’s meant to be a joke, but she simply frowns at me.

“So it seems,” she replies. OK, so that joke fell flat on its face. “How about playing some music for me, Brian? Shall we try that? What do you have?”

In fact I’ve been practising a couple of things furiously, the first of which is by James Hook, an eighteenth-century English organist and composer who made lots of money by writing idiot-proof pieces for beginners. I set off playing it, pretending to follow the music, but actually as soon as I refer to the music for real, I lose my way, so I end up playing the piece as a four-part serial. Nor is the second piece any more successful, a “Little Study in D Minor” by Theodor Kirchner, a composer I know nothing about and care even less. My version of his “Little Study” occasionally finds the key of D minor, but only occasionally.

The end of this – I hesitate to use the word – performance – is greeted with silence by Mary Maxwell-Hume. She studies me for a moment, then utters her judgement.

“You’re not very good, are you?”

Actually, I thought I was a bit better than ‘not very good’, perhaps ‘requires improvement’ or even ‘shows some promise’, so ‘not very good’ is a bit of a disappointment.

“No,” I agree. “Is Grade Three beyond me?”

“Perhaps you need to broaden your horizons,” she suggests.

“What did you have in mind?”

“The Associated Board isn’t the only organisation that offers piano exams.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Not at all. There are also the Trinity Guildhall exams, and the London Colleges offer exams, too. There’s even RockschooL, which does exams for playing rock music.”

“Really?” I perk up, “Rock sounds fun.”

“It’s also very hard, and horrible to listen to. But anyway, I have another suggestion. I think we should consider the British School of Music’s exams. I like them best anyway, but I also believe you could pass Grade Three in the BSM’s syllabus.”

“Is it easier?”

“Not at all. It’s just that the BSM looks for different qualities in its candidates. They’re less concerned with technique, more with musicality. The scales and arpeggios don’t count so much.”

“Sounds good.”



“On the other hand the British School of Music asks its candidates to be more musical.” She leans across to a side table and picks up a small purple-covered booklet I haven’t noticed before. “Page four of the BSM syllabus here says that ‘candidates will be assessed on their ability to impress the examiner with their sense of musicality. Candidates should choose at least one piece that the examiner is unlikely to have heard before, and to perform it in such a way that the examiner is likely to want to hear it again.’”

“Wow,” I say. “How on earth do I do that? And how do I find a piece that the examiner is unlikely to have heard before? Write it myself?”

“That would be one possibility, but are you up to that?”

“No,” I admit, then a bright notion occurs to me. “What about that piece where the pianist sits and plays nothing at all? They won’t have heard that, I suppose.” It’s another attempt to lighten the mood. I actually think it’s quite funny, but once again it fails completely.

“4.33 by John Cage,” she says, utterly seriously. “Complete silence, but harder for beginners than it seems. Most play it either too fast or too slow.”

She continues to study me, then that Mona Lisa smile returns. “Might I suggest you might use something from my library of lesser-known piano pieces?”

To say I’m surprised at this is an understatement. “You have such a thing?”

“Certainly.” She reaches behind her again, and this time produces a black A4 ring-binder which proves to be full of printed piano music. “They’re arranged here by difficulty, Grade One through to Grade Eight. I have a few here at Grade Three level.” She reaches into the folder and hands me a piece of paper. “How about this one?”

It’s just a jumble of notes, of course. The piece is entitled “Study In A Flat” and its composer appears to be “M. M. Hume”.

“You wrote this?” I ask her.

“Yes. I should play it for you, shouldn’t I, to let you hear how it should sound?”

I’m not given a chance to reply. Insisting I don’t need to get up, she sits beside me on the stool, relieves me of the music and transfers it to the music rest on the piano itself. It’s quite a long piano stool, so there’s plenty of room for both of us, but her need to get as near to the middle of the keyboard pushes her body into the closest contact with mine. And of course there’s that perfume.

Mary Maxwell-Hume seems quite immune to any discomfort I might be feeling as she plays the piece, a slow waltz which has a simple tune and a quiet left hand accompaniment. When she finishes, I have to admit I rather like it. But it seems a little hard and it’s written in A flat, which is a very difficult key indeed for Grade Three, and I tell her I’m not sure that I can manage it.

“Oh but you *must*,” she insists. “The one thing you must do is let my music be heard.” Then she says firmly again, studying the music rather than me, “You will do this, Brian. You will.”

“I can try.”

She instructs me to try immediately, at a couple of points even physically placing my hands in particular positions on the keys. Of course it’s a disaster, but once I’ve played it a couple of times with her on the stool beside me, she returns to her sofa and asks me to play it once through as a ‘concert’ performance, taking care not to stop. I don’t stop, but the sound that emerges from her lovely piano is something similar to the sound the refuse men emptying my rubbish into their lorry.

“I’d like you to take it home and practise it, and come back next week. Practise the other two pieces as well – you’ll need all three for the exam.” Then suddenly she changes tack. “Are you fortunate enough to have any family, Brian?”

It’s the first personal thing we’ve discussed. I briefly explain that I’m recently divorced and that I have two grown-up children, but I tell it succinctly, given that this is costing two pounds per minute. Even BT’s Helpline is cheaper.

“What about you?” I ask her.

“No. Just me. I’m fine with that.” It’s a minimalist reply, and it seems to mark the end of the lesson. Mary Maxwell-Hume announces that I’m due her ninety pounds for forty-five minutes’ worth of piano lesson – around sixty pounds more than I was expecting to pay – and she’s looking forward to seeing me at the same time next week. No doubt.

As we make for the front door – there’s a moment’s delay as I wrestle to get my shoes back on – I’m aware that she can’t charge me any more for time spent in small talk. I take the opportunity to spear in another personal question.

“Do you teach piano full-time, Mary, or do you have a day-job as well?”

“Yes and no,” she replies. “I’m a nun. I regard that as my ‘day-job’, if you wish to see it that way. Some might not.” My jaw must be dropping too obviously, because she carries on, “Not all nuns dress the same way, Brian. I belong to the order of the Sisters of Mary of the Sacred Cross.”

I’ve never heard of them, but that doesn’t mean much. “So your order believes you should dress in the same way as everyone else?”

“Not quite, Brian. Clothing should not act as an adornment of the body, and we believe we should only wear what is necessary to provide due modesty.”

“I see.” Actually, I’m not sure that I do.

I *do* put some effort into my piano practice.

The following Thursday at six, I present myself at Mary’s front door, which opens to reveal the same Mona Lisa smile, the same hair, the same lack of shoes, the same Chanel No. 5; only the dress has altered. This time it’s a light cotton print which – against the strong sunlight streaming through the conservatory window, perhaps reveals a little more of her lithe form than is appropriate for a music teacher or a nun, far less both, but I’m too polite to do any more than look away. The scales need more attention, she declares, the Hook is ‘clunky’ and the Kirchner has improved, she says, to ‘awful’. She listens to her own piece patiently, but declares it to be ‘rather ordinary’. I suggest that ‘rather ordinary’ represents a huge improvement, but she’ll have none of it. She demands ‘exceptional’. So I’m sent away with a long list of things to work on, and a wallet another ninety pounds lighter.

Exactly one week later, almost everything is identical again, and if the elegant ankle-length black silk dress she’s wearing isn’t see-through in any way this time, it somehow allows for even greater contact as she joins me at the piano stool to demonstrate one or two aspects of each piece to me. She chooses this moment to spring a surprise.

“Now, Brian, I have some news for you. I’ve entered you for the Grade Three exam.”

I’m genuinely shocked. “But am I ready? Surely not?”

“No, but you will be by the time of the exam,” she reassures me.

“When will that be?”

“A fortnight tonight, six o’clock.”

“*A fortnight?*”

“The exam will be held in the church hall down at the end of the road,” she adds, with the Mona Lisa smile. You pass it as you come down the road each time.”

“I need to do masses of work, surely,” I say in panic.

“You do. *We* do, Brian. We need to spend a good while tonight, for a start.”

I point out that this is costing me a lot of money.

“But that’s why we need to present you for the exam so soon, Brian. Remember if you fail, I give you all your money back. By the way, the exam itself costs seventy-five pounds to enter. Cash.”

This is getting worse. “I give it to you now? I don’t have that sort of money on me, Mary.”

She looks at me as if I were a five year old. “Of course not. You pay the examiner. If you want the results on the day, by the way, there’s a surcharge of twenty-five pounds.”

“A hundred in total, in other words.”

“Indeed. Or else the results can take several months.”

I don’t have to pay the entry fee that night, but by the time we’ve finished, my lesson has set me back one hundred and twenty pounds.

My last lesson, then, is to be a mere four weeks after Mary Maxwell-Hume and I first met. Outside her door, I pause for a moment to wonder what awaits me, although I should know by now. It opens to reveal: barefoot, tall, slim figure, delicate earrings, hair as before. Mona Lisa smile. The dress, however, is calf-length, deep red, and made of an expensive cotton crepe that gives and stretches with every part of her body. As I follow her through to the living room, I am acutely aware that anything worn *under* the dress would now be showing through it. Except that nothing is.

She turns round and catches me looking at her.

“Is everything all right, Brian? You’ve forgotten to remove your shoes.” she asks. The Mona Lisa smile is still there.

In my fumbling confusion to rectify my error, I blurt it out. “Sorry. I was admiring your dress, Mary. It’s lovely – I mean it’s a lovely colour.”

“It’s functional,” she replies. Then I remember. *We believe we should only wear what is necessary to provide due modesty.*

Mary has already warned me that this will need to be an intensive session, so without further ado she has me play through all the scales and a couple of arpeggios. It’s slow, but the mistakes have decreased. Then I move on to the James Hook piece, which remains ‘clunky’ she says, but she encourages me to play it a little slower for accuracy, and in the end I play it three times, whereupon she declares it ‘ready’. The Kirchner has improved massively with practice, and is now almost up to ‘poor standard’ she says. However, I should be comforted by the fact that standards are not high and may even, in the opinion of Mary Marston-Smith, be declining. I’m not sure if this reassures me or not. I play this only twice, I think because that’s as much as she can stand of it.

Then we come to *Study In A Flat*. I really have tried to practise this piece hard, but although I like it, I'm aware that playing anything in A Flat is just a step too far at this early stage in my piano career. Mary listens to me stumbling through it twice, then she shrugs her shoulders.

"You can only do your best, Brian."

"And if I fail, I get my money back?"

"I'm sure you'll pass," she says.

"You're so confident," I say to her. "I don't know how you can do it. If I were teaching me, I'd have given up on me long ago," I explain, wondering if that makes any sense at all.

"Ah yes, but I have a trump card," she announces. And with that, she comes to sit beside me on the piano stool, the first time tonight that she's been this close in that red dress. She's very close anyway, but now she takes my hand for good measure.

"Let us pray, Brian."

I have absolutely no idea how to react to this, so I just go along as she closes her eyes and says quietly, "Heavenly Father, grant thy servant Brian all thy grace in his piano exam next Thursday. Be with him as plays his scales and arpeggios, plays the work of Hook and Kirchner, and give him the strength to move the examiner as he performs *Study In A Flat*. Amen."

There's little more that I can do other than say "Amen", too, although I do manage to thank her in a bemused sort of way.

"You will do well, Brian. But I think we're done tonight, and our session has lasted one-and-a-half hours. That'll be one hundred and eighty pounds, please. Cash, if you don't mind."

It's as well that I made an extra visit to the cash machine on the way to her house. The money's handed over, and then we make our way to the door and my shoes.

"Good luck, Brian," she says, shaking my hand. "Do well."

"I promise to do my best. Shall I let you know how I get on?"

"There won't be a need. You *will* pass, Brian. God will be at your side," she insists, as she closes the door behind me for the final time.

Each evening in the week that follows I spend two hours practising the various aspects of the exam. I even spend some time on scales, so that by the day of the exam the major keys of C, D and G are reasonable, as are the minors in A and E, although the rest range from poor to the entirely hopeless E flat. I live in hope the examiner won't ask me to play it, and if he does, it won't count too much. After all, that's why I'm doing the British School of Music's piano exams. I can play the two better-known pieces without too many stops, but they don't sound anything like the recordings I've downloaded to my iPod. I've also discovered that people record themselves playing this sort of thing on YouTube. These sound great to me – a six-year-old plays the Hook in one clip quite brilliantly – and they get (mostly encouraging) feedback as well. By comparison I'm awful, that's the truth of it. Mercifully, the *Study In A Flat* is unknown, so apart from Mary Maxwell-Hume's own private performances, I've nothing to compare myself with.

Fortunately, the Thursday proves to be a busy day at my school, taken up largely with a major fight in the playground involving nine biting and scratching girls, so I have little chance to get nervous. But as I leave the building and head for my Honda Jazz in the car park, my legs immediately turn to jelly, and my hands are sweating already as I start the car and turn the steering wheel to head for Trinity. The heavy traffic simply heightens my blood pressure and a

visit to the usual cash machine – two hundred pounds withdrawn, just to be on safe side -means I arrive at the exam venue with less than five minutes to spare.

As Mary has promised, it's actually a church hall on the corner of her street, less than two hundred yards from her own house, and I fleetingly wonder if at this very moment she might be on her knees at the piano praying for me to do well. If her guarantee is to hold good, she stands to lose almost five hundred pounds in repaid tuition fees, although I realise that I'm so bad that I'm not sure I'll be able to face her again. One half of the double doors of the church hall is open, while the other sports green sheet of A4 paper attached with BlueTac with the words "Music Exam" and an arrow pointing inside. The exam, it seems, will not be held in the hall itself, but in a meeting room off a corridor up the side, and a couple of empty chairs are waiting for me outside.

Sitting on one, I can hear the faint sound of the piano playing. I'm not sure it's all that good, but I'm sure the player is miles better than me, and probably about eight years old. It's therefore rather a surprise when after a period of silence the door opens and an older man, round and balding, emerges with a wide smile and carrying some music and a certificate.

"The examiner asks if you could just please give her a moment and then she'll call you in," he says to me. "She's very nice, actually," he assures me. "Good luck."

I thank him with a nod and a nervous smile in reply. So the examiner's female. A minute or so later, there's a call: "Brian Reid?" and I stand up and walk through.

It's a bright, airy room, far brighter than the church hall itself. In the centre of the room stands a grand piano, my instrument of execution, bathed in evening sunlight like a guillotine. But it takes me a moment to sit down because the examiner is not looking me, she's seated at a table at the side of the room, deeply engrossed in writing up notes either on the previous candidate, or on me. By the way, she's a nun, fully dressed in a *red* habit – cowl, wimple, the lot – and sitting sideways on to me with her head down, I can see no part of her, not even her face. Hold on a moment – I catch a sight of her toes. I think she might be barefoot.

Without looking up, she says, "Good afternoon, Mr. Reid. I gather you're attempting Grade Three, and you would like your results today. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"That'll be one hundred pounds, please. Cash. Could you just lay it on the table please while I make out a receipt and complete this form for you?"

I do as I'm told. The voice is faintly familiar. As I say farewell to five twenty pound notes, I'm vaguely aware of Chanel No. 5, but I'm so nervous and confused that my imagination will be playing tricks with me. The money disappears into a bag below the table, leaving me standing before her as she continues to make notes.

"Make yourself comfortable at the piano, please," she commands, and again I do as commanded.

"Now," the examiner says, referring to what I assume is my entry form in front of her, "I gather you will be playing the Hook and the Kirchner from the approved list, and then you'll play a piece for me by M. M. Hume." Then she looks up at me for the first time. "Is that correct?"

To begin with, I'm speechless. Surely it can't be? It's the same... No, my nerves are confusing me and in any case all I can see of this woman is a very small circle round her face.

They probably all look the same that way, which I'm sure is the whole point. Anyway, I've got an exam to pass.

"Is that correct, Mr. Reid?" she repeats. She gives me a Mona Lisa smile that seems vaguely familiar. "By the way, my name is Sister Mary."

"Sorry," I say, "It's nice to meet you, too, Sister Mary, and, yes, that's correct."

"Shall we commence?" Again, it's not really a question. I nod. "Let's start with some scales, shall we? I'd like you begin with the key of C. Take your time – you have thirty seconds."

*Thirty seconds? That's one note every second.* I play the scale very slowly indeed on the way up, take care at the top, then even slower on the way down. Sister Mary smiles enigmatically.

"Thank you," she says. "Now, how about the scale of G?"

The key of G has one sharp. Even I can manage that in half a minute, but I take nothing for granted and proceed at funereal pace. Surely the dreaded E flat must follow soon.

"Now the key of D," she says, not even looking up.

I'm almost caught out because D and E flat are next to each other on the piano, and I almost play the wrong note to start with. But I use my thirty seconds and play the scale correctly.

"And finally a minor key." Maybe this is it. "How about E minor?"

I can hardly believe this. It's just about the easiest one she could ask for. I play E minor carefully, slowly, but – I suppose – otherwise perfectly.

"Well done, Mr. Reid," she says. "That concludes your scales. And the British School of Music doesn't always demand that candidates play arpeggios if their scales are sound. Yours are excellent, so we can move on to your pieces, I think."

I can hardly believe this – these exercises were my weak point and she's telling me I can skip them altogether. I like this exam.

"Now I'd like you to play a piece for me. How about trying the James Hook? Any time you're ready. We've plenty of time."

And so I play James Hook's *Tempo di Minuetto* from *Guida di Musica*, opus 37, to the best of my ability, which isn't very good, but in truth I can't do much better. Then I follow up with Theodor Kirchner's *Little Study in D minor*, opus 71, number 18, which, buoyed by the success of previous parts of my exam, I manage to sound less excruciating than I've ever made it sound before. Each piece receives a quiet smile and a "thank you, Mr. Reid".

"Now I'd like you to play your nominated special piece, Mr. Reid, which will be judged for its overall musicality rather than on technique. I see you have chosen a piece by M. M. Hume. Do you know anything about – him?" she asks. The Mona Lisa smile is there again.

"It's a 'she', actually. M. M. Hume is my piano teacher," I tell her.

"Excellent," she says, and sits back as if to enjoy the music. Poor her, I think.

But I play the piece, wishing an inward wish for Ms. Maxwell-Hume at the same time, because I do quite like playing it anyway.

A minute or so later, it's all over. I turn to look at the examiner, who to my surprise is – I think – brushing a tear from her eye.

"Are you all right?" I ask. "Have I upset you?"

She shakes her head. "Quite the reverse. It was beautiful. I've never heard such a beautiful piece."

I don't quite know what to say. "Thank you" is about the best I can manage.

## *The Piano Exam*

She turns her attention to the papers in front of her, and furiously scribbles lots of notes on my entry form, another sheet, and then finally signs everything. Eventually, she looks up at me.

“Mr. Reid, I’m delighted to inform you that you have passed Grade Three Piano at the British School of Music, and passed with distinction. If you’d care to step across here, I’ll present you with your certificate.” She rises from her chair to greet me with a slightly wider version of the Mona Lisa smile, offering me a signed certificate with her left hand, and her right hand to shake. “Perhaps you’d like to attempt Grade Four some time soon.”

I can hardly see any of her beneath her habit, of course, but what I can pick out of her tall, willowy figure is uncannily familiar. As is the Chanel No. 5.

Accepting my coveted certificate – the signature is illegible – and shaking her hand, I ask, “I wonder, might we have met before? You’re not by any chance from the order of the Sisters of Mary of the Sacred Cross, are you?”

The Mona Lisa smile replies before she speaks. She seems surprised. “You’ve heard of us? That’s nice.”

“My piano teacher happened to be of your order, as it happens.”

“My,” she says, “what a coincidence.”

“She doesn’t wear a red habit, though, she dresses... normally, if you know what I mean. The red habit is quite striking, isn’t it?”

“It’s functional. We believe we should only wear what is necessary to provide due modesty.” I think I understand what that means now, although where the Chanel No.5 fits in I can’t quite fathom.

Gathering my things together to make my exit, I say, “As far as Grade Four goes, Sister Mary, I think I might take a break from exams for a while. Perhaps in the future, though.”

“I do hope so,” she says. “You seem to have found an excellent teacher. You must let her know that you did so well.”

“I’ll phone her straight away to tell her the good news.”

But making my way from the church hall towards my Honda Jazz, I reflect on the cost of passing Grade Three piano in the British School of Music, and suspect I can at least save myself the price of a phone call.

# Study in A Flat

(British School of Music Grade 3 piano examination piece)

M. M. Hume

Andante (♩=84)

Musical notation for measures 1-7. The piece is in A-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. The tempo is Andante with a quarter note equal to 84 beats per minute. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment of chords.

8

Musical notation for measures 8-14. The melodic line continues with eighth and quarter notes, and the accompaniment remains consistent with chords.

15

Musical notation for measures 15-22. The right hand has a melodic line with some rests, and the left hand continues with the chordal accompaniment.

23

Musical notation for measures 23-27. The melodic line resumes with eighth and quarter notes, and the accompaniment continues with chords.

28

Musical notation for measures 28-32. Measure 28 begins with a *rit.* (ritardando) marking over a sixteenth-note arpeggiated figure. This is followed by a *a tempo* marking. The piece concludes with a *trill* marking over a final melodic phrase. The left hand accompaniment continues with chords throughout.