



FOSTER'S FLUTE STUDIO

A Comprehensive Guide to Mastering the RCM Flute Examinations

Many students at Foster's Flute Studio pursue the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) flute examinations. The RCM program inspires excellence through assessments and encourages students to track their progress and celebrate their accomplishments.

What is the Royal Conservatory of Music?

The Royal Conservatory of Music is one of the largest and most respected music education institutions in the world. For 135 years, the RCM has offered a standardized, nationally renowned program of music study and assessment through its certificate program. The program provides students with well-rounded training, from elementary through to advanced levels. With the completion of each level, students further hone their skills, develop their ability to play music, and nurture a lifelong appreciation for music-making.

Who are the RCM examinations suitable for? How do you start?

The RCM examinations are suitable for students of all ages (from beginner to advanced) seeking a structured, comprehensive approach to music education. They are ideal for those seeking to measure their progress through national standards. You do not have to start at Level 1; you can enter the examination system at the level appropriate to your ability (e.g., starting a Level 3). Skipping too many lower levels is not generally recommended however, as there are no shortcuts to developing technique. Doing one or two lower-level exams is beneficial to better understand the examination format before attempting more difficult levels.

What are the benefits of RCM examinations?

- Preparing for an examination provides students with an established goal to work towards. Students who participate in examinations tend to become more dedicated to their instrument and practice more often.
- Successfully completing an examination builds self-confidence and helps students develop a sense of pride.
- Examinations provide the highest quality of assessment, which includes detailed feedback and constructive comments from an examiner. This feedback can be very valuable to help further develop the student's skills.
- Regardless of a student's chosen career path, achievement in RCM examinations is an impressive addition to any resume. Examinations are indicative of a willingness to learn, an ability to set both short and long-term goals, and a commitment to achieving difficult tasks.
- The successful completion of RCM Levels 7 and 8 Practical and Theory examinations can earn high school credits in Ontario for Grades 11 and 12.

Read on to learn more about the examination process...

The Foster's Flute Studio RCM Examination Process

1. Determine Your Level

- Obtain the RCM Flute Syllabus
- Consult Lindsay
- Evaluate your flute skills and music knowledge

The RCM Flute Syllabus outlines all of the requirements for each level. In a flute lesson, Lindsay will present you with scales, studies, and repertoire from different levels—a level she thinks you are at, one level below, and one level above. This trial determines which materials feel too easy or too challenging. The goal is to match you to the level that corresponds to your current proficiency, while leaving room for you to grow. Lindsay will also consider your ability to read music, play technically, and understand music theory. The RCM requires consistency across all areas of each level; therefore, being well-rounded is key.

2. Comprehend the Requirements for Your Level

- Consult the RCM Flute Syllabus
- Understand the marking criteria and classification of marks

Now that you know your level, you must learn what is required to master that level and eventually, take the coordinating examination. In the RCM Flute Syllabus, each level has a table of requirements. You will see: repertoire, studies, technical tests, ear tests, and sight-reading. Levels 1-4 must prepare two pieces of repertoire with piano accompaniment—one from the Baroque or Classical time period and a second from the Romantic, 20th-, or 21st-century time period. Levels 5 and up must prepare three pieces of repertoire—two as listed above and a third that is unaccompanied. All levels must prepare two contrasting studies and a selection of technical tests (scales and arpeggios). Technical tests must be from memory with the specified tempos and articulations. Levels 7 and up must also prepare two contrasting orchestral excerpts. Lastly, students will learn ear training (clapping rhythms, identifying intervals/chords, playing back simple melodies) and sight reading. The ear tests and sight-reading requirements vary for each level.

RCM examinations use a 100-point marking criteria focused on accuracy, technical proficiency, and musicality, with 60+ considered a pass. Key areas include repertoire and technical requirements (the majority of marks). Areas worth less marks (ear tests, sight-reading) should not be overlooked. High scores (80-89) require clear refinement, while 90+ demands masterful artistry.

3. Obtain Your Materials and Select Your Studies/Repertoire

- Purchase the RCM Flute Overtone books
- Listen to recordings
- Choose pieces you enjoy that align with your skills

Students must have all of the necessary RCM books for their level. At Foster's Flute Studio, students pursuing Levels 1-4 must learn all of the book's studies and repertoire before making examination selections. The beginner levels are crucial for development and success at this point directly impacts how confident a student is in the intermediate and advanced levels. Students pursuing Levels 5 and up can select and learn just their examination studies and repertoire; however, additional studies and pieces of repertoire are highly encouraged.

Listening to studies and repertoire is an important first step in selecting your examination materials. Identify which ones you enjoy, as playing music you love greatly improves performance quality. Your selections should be contrasting to demonstrate versatility, and they should showcase your technical strengths and allow for musical expression.

4. Prepare a Timeline and Practice

- Create an online RCM account and schedule your examination date
- Understand what your preparation should look like month to month
- Rehearse with an accompanist

Exams are scheduled in-person three times per year—in January, June, and August. Registrations for January open in September, registrations for June open in January, and registrations for August open in April. Registrations are open for three months. The RCM also offers remote examinations. Remote examinations are open for registration on an ongoing basis and can be scheduled at any time. The scheduling of all examinations must be approved by Lindsay.

Preparing for an RCM examination requires a structured approach to ensure readiness. Most students require 8-12 months of dedicated preparation per level. A consistent long-term plan is essential for success, rather than last-minute practice. At the beginning of your examination preparation, focus on building your technical skills (scales, arpeggios) and learning the notes and rhythms of your pieces. Several months before your examination, your pieces should be largely learned. Next, begin incorporating ear training and sight-reading into daily practice. A couple of months before your examination, polish techniques, dynamics, and musical expression. Full run-throughs of your pieces should be comfortable at this point. One month before your examination, simulate examination

conditions and be able to perform the whole examination without stopping. You should also rehearse your repertoire with an accompanist, ensuring your part fits seamlessly with the piano. Multiple rehearsals with an accompanist are often necessary, particularly for intermediate and advanced levels.

5. Prepare a Mock Examination and Implement Feedback

- Decide the order of your examination/complete your Program Form
- Perform the entire examination from beginning to end for Lindsay
- Go over Lindsay's notes and make final adjustments

Mock examinations replicate the actual examination to help reduce anxiety and boost confidence under timed conditions. Lindsay covers all of the exam requirements in your chosen program order (students can choose to start their examination with either repertoire or technical tests) and provides constructive written or verbal feedback that identifies strengths and areas for improvement. Students have an opportunity to make any final adjustments ahead of their scheduled examination.

6. Perform the Examination and Receive Results

- Warm-up at home and/or in an examination warm-up room (not guaranteed)
- Arrive promptly
- Bring all necessary materials

Plan to arrive 15-30 minutes before your scheduled examination time. If a room is available, you need a little time to warm-up before going into the examination room (this can also be done at home). Ensure your music is organized and provide your Program Form and original copies of all music to the examiner (Lindsay will help with this). Expect a friendly yet professional atmosphere and trust that the examiner wants you to do your best. Six weeks after the examination, access your examiner's written evaluation through your online RCM account.

7. Obtain a Certificate

For Levels 1-4, students must successfully pass the flute examination to receive a certificate. For Level 5 and up, successful completion of both the flute and theory examinations is required to receive a certificate. Theory examinations—designed to complement practical studies—begin at Level 5. Students write theory examinations in a formal classroom setting and cover subjects such as rudiments, counterpoint, music history, harmony, and analysis.

Foster's Flute Studio Examination Tips

Be Prepared

Your success in an examination is directly related to how prepared you are. A lack of preparation can cause anxiety, impair your ability to perform, and result in poor execution. This can lead to self-doubt, increased fear of judgment, and low self-confidence. To ensure readiness, focus on the process, not the outcome. Prioritize organized practice where you isolate difficult sections and work slowly to improve. Trust that the quality of your practice will always be more important than the quantity of time spent.

Think Ahead

Before diving into your first notes, stop and think. Do you know the key signature of what you're about to play? What about the time signature? Have you thought about the tempo? Are you aware of the time period? Have you considered how the time period influences your musical choices? Examinations move from different scales to studies and repertoire quickly. The time between being asked to play something and making a sound is yours. Use it to start your performance strong, with clear intentions.

Mind the Details

Attention to detail transforms a technical performance into an artistic, engaging experience. While correct notes and rhythms are the foundation, details such as dynamics, articulations, and phrasing add character and depth, preventing a performance from sounding mechanical. Aim to incorporate musical details into your learning process as early as possible. Be imaginative. Developing an interpretation brings music to life, connects you to your performance, and draws the audience in.

Keep Going

All of us make mistakes. The key is not to let mishaps affect your performance. Avoid stopping, starting over, or repeating missed notes. Let mistakes go and keep your mind on the music that is still ahead of you. Focus on the next note or entrance and maintain rhythmic integrity. Examiner's value your ability to recover and continue the musical flow.

Be Well-Rounded

Examinations promote musicianship by integrating practical performance and technical skills with ear training and sight reading. Students tend to put more effort and practice into their repertoire as it's viewed as more enjoyable than identifying intervals or clapping rhythms. However, while repertoire makes up roughly half of the examination, those who balance all of the examination requirements tend not only to score better overall, but become more well-rounded musicians. Schedule regular ear tests and new note reading into your practice and you'll gain a deeper understanding of your music.

No Panic Practicing

Cramming in hours of practice before your examination is generally ineffective as it fails to build long-term muscle memory. Instead of creating durable skills, last-minute panic practicing usually results in temporary recall that fades quickly, heightened anxiety, and tension that can lead to other issues. Your muscles and brain need time and rest to process new techniques. Simply playing more does not equate to better results. Aim for consistent practice sessions throughout the week that reduce frustration and celebrate the small steps that you make to improve.

Questions? Ask Lindsay!

fostersflutestudio@gmail.com