

How is it even possible to cheat on a musical performance practical exam?

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The wife of one of my relatives is a classical pianist. Her father convinced her to get her undergraduate degree in music teaching, rather than music performance, so she would have a fallback career in case the performance thing didn't pan out.

Although it was a teaching university, they did have performance classes. For one of her piano performance classes, the midterm examination was a practical exam in three parts.

1. The examiners choose a key at random by pulling a slip of paper from a hat, and the student plays scales and arpeggios in that key.
2. The student plays a short prepared piece.
3. The student plays a long prepared piece.

My friend happened to be the first student on the exam schedule. She went into the examination room, played the scales and arpeggios in the requested key, and then played her short piece and her long piece. After she was done, the examiners asked her if she could stick around and help with administering the remainder of the exams: Checking that the correct student shows up, pulling the slips of paper, timekeeping, and performing other administrative tasks. She didn't have anything important planned for the rest of the afternoon, so she agreed.

The second student came into the examination room. Upon seeing that my friend was assisting, the student panicked and asked for a few moments to calm down.

After a brief break, the examination began. My friend pulled a slip of paper from the hat and announced "E flat major". The student played an E flat major scale rather clumsily and was still a little rattled for the performance of the short piece and the long piece.

A similar pattern repeated itself for the other students. There was a moment of panic (some students panicked more than others), a nervous set of scales and arpeggios, and then depending on how quickly the student calmed down, the short and long pieces ranged from shaky to solid.

Later, one of the students in the class explained to my friend what happened.

Apparently, all of the other students in the class had conspired to cheat on the exam. They knew from talking with students who had taken the class in the past that the examiners would ask the first student to stick around and be responsible for pulling the slips of paper. The students had decided among themselves who would practice which key's scales and arpeggios, and their plan was that whichever student was chosen to be the paper-slip-picker would ignore the instructions on the paper and just announce the key that the examinee had practiced.¹

When each student saw that my friend was the exam assistant, they realized that their plan had fallen apart, and they would most likely be asked to play scales and arpeggios in a key that they hadn't practiced.

The student explained why they created a cheating pact: "If we had to practice all 24 keys, then we wouldn't have time for partying and dating! We didn't include you because it's clear that you wouldn't be interested, seeing as you make no effort to look pretty."²

¹ The students didn't even distribute the keys among themselves in a plausible manner. Each student chose an easy key to practice, so there were a lot of F majors and E minors, but no B flat minors or B majors. Somehow they didn't think this would raise suspicion. But I guess that's sort of to be expected: The students who are prone to cheating aren't the smart ones.³

² I don't know what lofty standards the other students have for beauty. I think most people would consider my relative's wife to be within the conventional bounds of attractiveness.

³ The irony was not lost on me that these cheating students were working toward a *teaching* degree.