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# Wesseling Awards: Celebrating Braille Music

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## Introduction

“For any musician, knowing what notes a composer actually wrote is the only way to make independent and informed artistic decisions for oneself” (p. vii, Wesseling, 2004). While it is true that not all musicians and not all musical genres require written notation, for many it is essential and for others it can inform both the learning and performance process. Thus, for a musician who is blind, achieving musical independence, autonomy, and equity often requires incorporating Braille music within a broad repertoire of skills. Lisette Wesseling (1971-2016), professional singer and pedagogue, firmly believed in the value of Braille music and the access it affords to a wide range of musical opportunities. Additionally, ongoing developments in technology are increasing the availability of Braille music, providing even greater access for people who can read and use it. This paper introduces a new award system developed by Braille music users for Braille music users in New Zealand. We will consider the reasons why a Braille music award system is valuable, how it is structured, and the features that make these awards unique.

## Braille Focused Assessment

Louis Braille’s tactile system for reading and writing music was published in 1829 and has been in existence longer than many of the well-known international music examination systems. In New Zealand we have a plethora of music examinations already available including Trinity College, Royal Schools of Music, St Cecilia, New Zealand Music Examination Board, and the NZQA school system. These examining bodies maintain a valuable role in music education however, they are all performance or music theory, print-focused systems. They do not assess musical knowledge and skills embedded within our Braille music learning culture. This includes the different cognitive processes required by a Braille music user to, for example, interpret rhythmic concepts and chordal structures; the ability to determine melodic shape from a horizontal line of notation, or the necessity to translate Braille symbols from a language perspective into music concepts. Wesseling Awards are Braille-focused awards. Rather than replicating existing music theory or performance exams, Wesseling Awards celebrate features of musicianship specific to practical music making with Braille. They are designed to recognise established Braille music knowledge and encourage further learning in this important area of music literacy.

## Award Structure and Assessment

Wesseling Awards contain five levels of Braille music proficiency. Levels One, Two, and Three acknowledge the skills and understanding required for Braille readers to learn, read, and perform music from a Braille score. Level One requires basic Braille music knowledge and elementary musical skills. These are gradually extended over Levels Two and Three to incorporate Braille music knowledge and skills necessary for confident and competent musicianship. For many Braille music users, Levels One, Two, and Three will satisfy their musical needs. Levels Four and Five are encouraged for those who wish to extend their skills further. These final two levels incorporate Braille music knowledge and skills vital for advanced music study, Braille music proof-reading, or the ability to teach Braille music effectively. The key focus for all levels is the practical application of knowledge. For this reason, Level Five does not require memorisation of an extensive list of Braille music symbols, many of which are used only in specific contexts, but rather the competence to know where and how to access the required information and the ability to communicate musical meaning and application effectively.

To gain a Wesseling Award at any level, candidates undergo a series of tasks designed to assess Braille music related skills. Candidates must meet the standard in all tasks to receive the award. Included in Level One assessment tasks are touch-reading (the ability to read and apply Braille music information in the moment) and memorisation, an essential skill for all Braille music users. At Level Two, Braille writing, as opposed to music dictation, is added to the essential tasks. Braille writing does not demand musical interpretation of an aural excerpt, only the ability to notate music accurately as directed by the assessor. This task acknowledges the initial cognitive load for Braille music users as they shift learned and embedded physical movements used for brailling letters and numbers, to new musical understandings.

In Level Three, Braille writing is replaced with dictation, requiring the candidate to identify musical patterns contained within an aural excerpt and Braille them accurately. In addition, verbal description is introduced raising the number of Braille music related tasks to four. Though rarely necessary for a print music user, Braille music users in school settings are regularly called upon to dictate their work using accurate verbal descriptions to a sighted teacher or support person. This process demands confidence, clarity, and an understanding of both Braille music and print music conventions.

At Level Four, assessment tasks include memorisation, verbal description, and a new assessment task called demonstration. In this task, candidates are expected to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of common instrument signs and performance nuances contained within a short excerpt of music. The assessor directs the candidate to specific signs (e.g. bar 3 beat 2) for demonstration. Perfect performance is not stipulated but rather the ability to name the sign accompanied by an attempt to demonstrate physically, instrumentally, or vocally what the sign means and how it would be performed.

The ultimate level in the award system, Level Five, is designed to incorporate a wide breadth and depth of Braille music understanding, suggesting the holder has the skills necessary to pursue career opportunities which rely, in part, on Braille music. The assessment task of verbal description is expanded to include unusual signs and the ability to navigate through larger scores in a range of formats. Added to this is study skills. In this task, the candidate demonstrates their ability to study a Braille score independently and communicate their knowledge of the score, including noted errors in the score. This assessment takes a discussion format providing further space to develop and assess communication skills.

Throughout all levels, the overriding question that guides the assessment is, “did the candidate demonstrate that they understood the musical concepts in the Braille score to the degree that they could competently use this information in a musical context?” The goal is not to attain 100% accuracy or perfect performance, but to support and encourage the practical application of Braille music, in other words, to support and encourage active music making through Braille.

## Unique features

Wesseling Awards are uniquely Braille focused awards. They are intentionally designed to encompass specific elements essential to music making with Braille, elements that are generally not reflected in traditional music exams. Some aspects of music theory and performance are incorporated in the awards for the sole purpose of assessing a person’s ability to apply Braille in a musical context, not to assess performance skill or theoretical understanding. The focus of Wesseling Awards remains firmly on the application of Braille knowledge and practical music making.

Another important and unique feature of this award system is that all assessors will themselves be Braille music users, instead of sighted Braille music readers. Dr Wendy Richards, a sighted music teacher who has been deeply involved with the development of these awards, cannot remember a time when her young learners were assessed or examined by a blind person in any facet of their life. Ensuring that assessments will be undertaken with a blind Braille music user sitting in the assessor’s seat, a position of authority, will place the power where it rightfully belongs and expand the horizons of many young people.

A further way the unique value of Braille has been expressed is through the design of the physical award itself. It was determined early in the process that this award would not be one that was put on a shelf and then promptly forgotten. It needed to reflect the significance of achieving it, the time and energy invested, and the skills and knowledge gained through the process. The Wesseling Award is an interactive trophy that is added to at each level. It is designed by blind people to feel good in the hand, to be textually stimulating, and incorporate an element of motivation. The Wesseling Award is aesthetically pleasing visually, but more importantly, it is tactually pleasing.

## Lisette Wesseling

Wesseling awards have been crafted with the memory of Lisette Wesseling central to the process. Lisette, who was born blind, had many successes both personally and for the causes she championed. As well as forging her own successful career on the stage and as a recording artist, she helped other blind people access music education and performance. Lisette taught both Braille and singing, believing both to be talents that granted freedom of expression for the learner and combined her two great passions in life when she published a book called *“Focus on Braille Music”.*

Lisette firmly believed that just as “language literacy can stimulate the imagination, music literacy can only enhance and strengthen a child’s musical creativity” (p. vii, Wesseling, 2004). Lisette’s reputation and influence as a singer and pedagogue helped shape the teaching of Braille music in New Zealand. Wesseling Awards honour her legacy. They reflect her personal and professional values of working hard to achieve musical goals and her expectation that her students would likewise strive hard in their musical pursuits. The Wesseling Awards are supported by a fund established in her honour by her husband Neil.

## Conclusion

Wesseling Awards are an exciting addition to the landscape of Braille music activities in New Zealand. They represent a formal platform through which we celebrate Braille music, encourage the active pursuit of Braille music skills, and acknowledge the individual effort required to achieve this element of musical literacy. It is our sincere hope that young people and adults alike will take up the opportunity and the challenge to have their Braille music skills recognised formally through the Wesseling Award process, and in doing so, will be inspired to continue learning and using this important element of music literacy.

Wesseling, L. (2004). *Focus on Braille Music.* London: Musicians in Focus Ltd.