

# Sheet music review: Rockschool Guitar books (2024) Grades 6-8

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When Rockschool first hit the scene in the late 1980s, rock musicians had very few ways of proving their credentials. Organised classical piano exams existed, for example, but they had little correlation with the actual music being performed live or in the recording studio.

Rockschool was developed specifically with the goal of filling this gap. The vision was straightforward: evaluate real-world performance ability with rigour. Today, RSL Awards, the organisation that sustains Rockschool, offers Ofqual-regulated music exams for modern music students. Within the UK, these exams can count towards entrance to college, professional training purposes, and

even the Duke of Edinburgh Award (if a tutor can evidence the work).

- [Sheet music review: Rockschool Guitar books \(2024\), Grades 1-5](#)

## **Academic recognition**

Grades 6 to 8 fall under Level 3 on the Regulated Qualifications Framework. This puts them on a par with A-level and other equivalent post-16 courses. The exams consist of prepared pieces plus supporting tests involving ear-training, sight-reading and improvisation. These exams offer UCAS points, meaning the grades can contribute to university applications, and students who take part in the Duke of Edinburgh Award can use the grades to prove their ability and dedication to a subject.

### **Grade 6**

At this level, students may reach a pivotal stage in their development. Skills involving two-handed tapping, harmonics, and more fluid legato playing will have been established, and scales incorporate the minor pentatonic scales and modes such as Dorian. Arpeggios involving sevenths and certain chord voicings also form part of the technical requirements.

'Parallel Universe' by Red Hot Chili Peppers will test rhythm and endurance, while 'All Along the Watchtower' challenges phrasing and tone control. I have found that confidence often grows as students tackle this technically complex repertoire, so these are welcome inclusions.

### **Grade 7**

Building on earlier foundations, this stage places greater emphasis on musical expression and harmonic understanding. Technical study may include hybrid picked notes, chromatics, and complex harmonies, alongside the application of modes such as Lydian and Phrygian and the jazz melodic minor scale. Pieces like Stevie Ray Vaughan's 'Texas Flood' require precise timing, vibrato, and dynamic control, while Tower of Power's 'Soul With a Capital S' focuses on articulation and muting. Integration of facility and expression becomes essential here – examiners won't give top marks for robotic playing.

## **Grade 8**

Students at this level are expected to perform at a professional standard. Technical challenges include complex rhythmic ideas with varying time signatures, intricate subdivisions, and fingerstyle voicings. Scales and arpeggios include whole-tone, diminished, and altered forms, along with dominant extensions. Repertoire such as Eric Johnson's 'Cliffs of Dover' demands refined legato, articulation and tone, while 'Spain' by Chick Corea tests rhythm accuracy and harmonic understanding. Contemporary works like 'Every Piece Matters' by Plini require a grasp of modern phrasing, tone and intricate rhythmic structures, with an emphasis on developing a personal musical identity.

## **Supporting tests**

Supporting tests are a crucial part of the exam. Quick Studies are tasks where a brief unseen piece (given to the candidate a few minutes before performance) tests their sight-reading skills, interpretation and reactivity. Ear tests, meanwhile, involve listening and echoing back melodies and rhythms, offering a direct insight into a candidate's aural skills. Such tests complement the

prepared repertoire and provide a better overall picture of a candidate's skill-set.

## **Exam options**

Students opt to take either a Grade Exam or a Performance Certificate, which are structured differently. In the Grade Exam, candidates must play three pieces from the Grade book; two can be free-choice pieces. Then there's the additional technical work and supporting tests.

For the Performance Certificate, candidates perform a total of five pieces, of which a maximum of three can be free choice. There's no requirement for technical or unseen supporting tests. The Graded Certificate is a digital exam choice without unseen tests.

## **Teacher guidance and syllabus benefits**

RSL allows the inclusion of free choice pieces from outside the syllabus for the Grade Exam and Performance Certificate, and candidates are encouraged to perform revised repertoire or original tracks by RSL where suitable. Benchmarked accredited free-choice pieces have to be suitable for the grade and the instrument, and these can be accompanied by recorded or live backing, or performed solo – according to the musical nature of the piece.

The administration for the examination entry and delivery processes has become more accessible in recent times. Candidates from the UK and Ireland can take face-to-face examinations conducted at public centres or private settings offered in schools or studios. Live-stream digital examinations are also possible; here, the candidate is seen remotely and examined by the examiner in real-time. Recorded digital examinations are allowed for certain certificate schemes.

These enable candidates to record a demonstration of the examination to be uploaded.

## **Conclusion**

RSL Guitar Grades 6 to 8 allow educators flexibility in teaching highly capable students. One strength of this syllabus is its ability to promote technical depth while allowing students to identify with various genres. At the same time, the syllabus gives students yardsticks through external assessments.

Taken together, Grades 6, 7, and 8 offer a consistent sequence from advanced level study through to performance at a professional standard. The series is committed to the original founding principles of Rockschool, with a remit to reflect the realities of the current musical landscape.

Personally, as a peripatetic guitar teacher, I rely heavily on these books to reinforce my teaching. I have found it can be short-sighted to teach 'fun' songs and riffs to students as, before long, lessons can feel hollow. Having something to aim for like a grade exam can motivate pupils. It also widens their listening palette and appreciation for music they may not have discovered otherwise.

## ***Rockschool Guitar Books***

*From £17.99 each; teacher pack, Debut to Grade 8 (9 books):  
£158.02*

[rslawards.com](http://rslawards.com)