

Notes and guidance: Non-exam assessment (NEA)

Contents

You can use the title links to jump directly to the different sections of this scheme of work.

Section	Page
Performance	2
Composition	4

NEA Advisors

This guide is intended to augment the information given in the specification and to address some questions NEA Advisors receive.

However, it cannot be comprehensive, and it is important to note that every centre has access to an NEA Advisor who can answer specific questions relating to Performance and Composition (though not the exam which is not non-examined assessment).

If you do not know who your NEA Advisor is, please email music@aqa.org.uk.

Performance

General

A recorded performance is **not** the same as a live performance and should be approached with a 'recording' mentality. Time should be allotted to listening back to the recording (by both teacher and student) to enable an assessment of how the performance will be heard by an examiner who was not in the room and, if necessary, to re-record a piece. Because pieces are able to be re-recorded, a high level of accuracy is demanded at A-level.

Ambition of project

Judicious selection of repertoire is important for this unit. Teachers are advised to begin the process of selecting pieces with their students as early as possible to ensure that appropriate repertoire is recorded.

In practice, this sometimes will involve sacrificing a mark (out of 5) on this aspect of the mark scheme to achieve a greater overall result, as detailed in the 2022 examiner's report:

"There were many examples of students who judiciously selected music which achieved less marks for Ambition of project, however, enabled them to maximise their marks in the other criteria."

In a programme in which several pieces of differing standards are presented, examiners will take the average standard of the pieces.

Technical control

It is important to note that performances in which the intonation is not fully secure cannot receive a mark in the top band. This is, similarly, the case for performances that have consistent rhythmic inaccuracy.

Expressive control

An incredibly important aspect of expressive control is, of course, dynamics. It is frequently heard by examiners that contrast is diminished by the use of limiters or equalisers on recording devices. It is therefore imperative that care is given to the device used ensuring that the mechanics are understood and used appropriately for the performance being recorded.

Performance quality

There are a number of aspects for students to consider here:

1. If pieces presented represent contrasting styles, these styles should be reflected in the performances. For example, the tone quality of a singer would be different in a baroque aria to a musical theatre song.
2. Where an accompanist is used in the recording, it must be ensured that that part is reinforcing, not hindering, the performer. Enough time must be given for effective rehearsal between student and accompaniment.
3. Where a backing track is used, the quality of both the track itself and the playback is important to the success of the submission.

Production

Production submissions are becoming more frequent. The following are aspects that students should bear in mind:

1. Higher marks are achieved by students presenting submissions with a high level of musical and technical demands including high numbers of tracks and careful, detailed editing, balancing and mixing.
2. In particular, care should be given to compression and EQ which, if not handled carefully, can create a product lacking in depth
3. Where vocal parts are recorded, particular care must be given to ensure that they do not 'stick out' and that they are diligently blended into the other parts.

Composition

General

The teaching of the composition unit is perhaps best approached by the building of a 'composer's toolkit', a set of compositional techniques (eg the handling of modulation, writing a sequence, controlling counterpoint etc) which can be referred back to during the completion of the submission in the year of certification.

It is important to ensure students explore genres and techniques of A-level standard.

Examples of **sub**-A-level genres include:

- songs based on a simple verse-chorus structure which use simplistic repeating chord progressions
- pieces with restricted textures that remain unchanged throughout
- pieces that remain in the same key throughout, that are entirely diatonic or have a harmonic rhythm that never changes
- compositions that are highly sectional or which use a 'sketchbook' approach.

Programme notes

The specification stipulates that the programme note for each composition should be: "of approximately 150 words that identifies:

- the compositional intention, including the intended audience/occasion
- details of the software and hardware used in the compositional process".

It is important to note that the programme note does not appear in the mark scheme. It is therefore not marked as such, but it is an opportunity to explain the intention, as well as directing the examiner to anything important within the composition.

Examples of this may include:

- Where and how the musical stimuli from the brief is used
- Particular inspiration for a piece. This can be particularly helpful to an examiner where the style of music is relatively obscure.

Programme notes should not be overly verbose and act as an additional aural guide.

Brief infringement

Composition briefs vary in the specificity of their requirements, but, where there is clear-cut guidance, this **must** be adhered to. For example, if a brief states the piece should be no longer than 3 minutes, a piece which lasts 3 minutes 2 seconds does not meet this section of the brief, and the mark will be affected accordingly. Musical stimuli **must** be used in the form given where the brief requires a student to do so; if a given chord progression contains a 7th chord but a student changes this to a 9th chord that is an infringement of the brief (albeit a rather small one, in this example).

If in any doubt about the wording of the brief, please contact your NEA Advisor who will be in touch with the Lead Examiner.

Chorale layout

In the 2023 series, approximately 45% of students attempted Brief 1: Chorales. The following points will help students in their submissions:

- The given melody and bass in extract 1, and melody in extract 2, must not be changed. It is advisable to refer back to the given material regularly to ensure that notes have not been inadvertently changed.
- Completed chorales should not be annotated with chord symbols or roman numerals. These are not necessary and are not marked.
- While solutions can be submitted in open or closed score, many more problems commonly occur in open score so it is advised (even if some work is undertaken in open score) to reduce scores to closed for final checking and submission.
- Higher level solutions will include a good variety of keys, suspensions, passing modulations and purposeful basslines. Good training on these aspects is available from various sources.
- Both chorales should be included in the same PDF document for submission.

Score layout

The quality of the score/aural guide is an important part of the mark scheme and must not be an afterthought for students. In particular, the following errors should be avoided:

- Too few bars per page resulting in a score of many pages which is extremely difficult to follow.
- Staves that are too small making them very hard to read (often a result of exporting a score from a digital audio workstation (DAW)).
- Scores that have multiple empty bars at the end.
- Scores which have meaningless notes (often a result of exporting a score from a DAW):
 - Drum kit parts which are notated with sharps, flats etc
 - Parts for instruments which are too high, too low or in a clef which necessitates multiple leger lines.
- Scores in which rhythms are notated very poorly (often a result of poorly quantised parts on a DAW).
- Scores which omit a part which has been recorded as an audio track.

As examiners must read scores on a screen through the DMP, scores should be presented, where possible, in **landscape**.

Aural guide detail

An aural guide can be a highly effective means of presenting work and, in many cases, would be far more appropriate than a notated score (especially for reasons seen above). Where an aural guide is the chosen written material, the following points will be helpful for students:

- Include timings.
- If using 'piano roll' notation, include the piano keyboard otherwise it is impossible to ascertain any absolute pitch.
- An 'arrange window' screenshot tells an examiner little.
- Small sections of notated score are very helpful to a submission.
- There should be an attempt to include significant musical detail including, where appropriate, for example:

- Chord symbols
- Rhythmic detail
- Melodic description or notation
- Tonal information.

As examiners must read aural guides on a screen through the DMP, aural guides should be presented, where possible, in **landscape**.

Admin

Submissions are now via the digital media portal. [Further information and guidance](#) for how to submit audio files using the digital media portal can be found on our website.