



GCSE MUSIC

8271/C: Composing
Report on the Examination

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Response to the task

There have been some stunning compositions of a quality beyond what might be expected at GCSE. There have also been some compositions where the link between the music and the brief/audience/occasion has not been as strong as it needs to be. It is important for teachers and students to consider both the set and selected briefs very carefully, because the suitability of the music is important to the overall assessment of the composition.

A small number of centres had, unfortunately, given the 2018 briefs paper to their students, instead of the 2019 paper. Please note that the briefs for the summer 2020 examination will be released on the 15th September this year in the Secure Key Materials section of the website. Teachers will need e-AQA access in order to view and download the paper. Examinations Officers in centres can organise this very quickly for teachers who don't have access.

Composition to the set brief

The set briefs will always be written in such a way as to encourage students to take an individual approach, composing freely in the style/genre most appropriate to their skills and musical interests. A few centres recognised this and there was variety in the submissions, with most, if not all briefs attempted within the centre. Unfortunately, this was not always the case, and in some centres it appeared that the teachers had decided which brief should be attempted by all the students, undertaking some generic study before the students embarked on the task.

A very small number of centres had used the briefs from 2018, and an equally small number had not chosen a brief at all, or had stated a chosen brief but then failed to link the composition to it.

Brief 1

This was a very popular choice, and many students responded well, but many pieces failed to really exploit an instrument's capabilities. For example, a piece, nominating the alto sax, was a jazz piece for small combo and trumpet in which the sax hardly featured at all. The trumpet would have been a better choice as it played for a substantial amount of time.

Brief 2

This was the most popular choice, and there were some really lovely songs, and examples of "Incidental music". Many responses to this were pop songs, and some were eminently suitable for inclusion in a piece of musical theatre. The least successful however lacked any real context and were simply pop songs, composed with a formulaic approach. It would have helped if, in the programme note, candidates had described the synopsis, characters, moods, or exactly what the music was supposed to evoke. Quite a few instrumental numbers appeared, including overtures and other Incidental music. There was some excellent work here, and some fine "live" performances. There were indeed some super songs, composed by candidates who really understood the genre and some of these were fully realised with "live" performances, whilst others used the vocal realisation provided by software such as "Sibelius".

Brief 3

Many pieces adhered to one particular genre, e.g. tango or waltz. Some changed time signature, tempo and/or rhythm every few bars. It has to be said that some of these pieces worked.

Disappointingly many ended up sounding fragmented, sometimes incoherent, rarely spending long enough in any one section, with some awkward shifts of key and time signatures into another section. Many of these pieces also relied heavily on direct repetition. This was a shame, given that many schools use computers with software such as Garageband or Logic Pro to compose which offer plenty of opportunity for the use of synthesized sounds..

Brief 4

This proved to be the least successful response, but there were a few interesting responses. Many candidates appeared to have difficulty in relating their music to a sculpture, and the programme notes did not always clarify intentions. A number of candidates decided upon a minimalist approach. Rarely did they evidence a real grasp of this genre, and of how to structure such a piece. Resorting mainly to simple repetition and layering of short phrases. Serialism also featured, but again, rarely convincingly. For some pieces, commendable in themselves, it was difficult to aurally appreciate any relation to a contemporary sculpture.

Free composition

The range and quality of free compositions was as varied as in the previous specification. The best work often came from centres where students had clearly been encouraged to compose freely. In these instances submissions included piano pieces, pieces for instrumental groups including strings, brass and percussion, rock and pop pieces in a variety of styles, instrumental jazz music including some excellent fusion, pieces for small and large orchestral ensembles, film music, dance music, music for gaming and the occasional piece of folk music from a wide variety of western and far eastern cultures.

There are still a number of centres that prescribe a particular brief and/or genre for all the students in the cohort, the most common of these being to produce a composition using the blues or minimalism. All too often in these cases it appeared that the students were working in that style for the first time, and few of these submissions gave the impression that students had been allowed to compose with freedom, which should enable maximum opportunities for success. Many of the blues compositions had little sense of style other than the repeated three chord, twelve bar structure, and most of the minimalist submissions tended towards extreme repetition of rhythmically very square melodic ideas. It was rare to see pieces like this demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the composition process.

There were some perceptive and imaginative audience/occasion choices. These were mostly in cases where students had chosen imaginative titles to reflect the nature of their music. It was disappointing to see a good number that appeared to be selected with little thought and imagination. A large number of compositions were simply titled “Composition 1” and/or “Composition 2” or “Brief Composition” and “Free Composition”. Often the selected audience occasion was simply “a concert”, “teenagers”, “anyone”, “old people” (very popular for blues compositions), and, perhaps least satisfying of all, “general listening”. Some candidates failed to choose a suggested audience/occasion on the CRF, although many actually referred to it in the programme note.

The Programme Note

Whilst the programme note does not attract a mark in terms of the overall assessment, it is important. This is because it informs the assessor (teacher) and the moderator about the students' reasons for selecting specific elements and how they have been used to make the music suitable for the given/selected audience/occasion. There were some superb responses to this that had been clearly and carefully thought through. These were a great aid to moderation. There were a small number of instances where students had written little or no information.

On the whole there was a sense that candidates really do like the ideas behind the two compositions. Many wrote enthusiastically in the programme note about the reasons for their choice of brief, and many clearly enjoyed the chance to demonstrate their particular musical interests, especially in the free composition.

Assessment / selection and use of elements

The assessment model requires students to select and use at least two elements from each of the two grids. These grids have been purposely designed to enable all students to compose freely. A minimum of two elements from each grid will allow for an effective, holistic assessment of the way in which the student has used the elements in combination, to produce an effective piece of music, in cases where this is appropriate. For example, a student wishing to compose a piece of percussion music for purely un-tuned percussion might choose rhythm, metre from grid 1, and timbre, dynamics from grid two. If the phrasing and articulation of the rhythmic ideas are important to the overall effect of the music, these elements might also be selected. The fact that the elements appear in two separate groups allows teachers to 'fine tune' this holistic assessment to take account of situations where some aspects of the writing might be more or less effective than others.

Many teachers seemed to have understood this principle and many students had selected all the elements that were evident in their music. There were occasions when students had composed music where the central and most obvious focus of the composition, and use of elements, was melody and harmony. However, these had not been ticked in the CRF, or mentioned in the programme note. In these cases students had often ticked structure/form and timbre/dynamics and it seemed as if teachers might be trying to ignore the fact that there were deficiencies in the melodic and harmonic writing so they could award marks in the highest bands for the use of structure, form, timbre and dynamics. In these cases, the marking was often inaccurate, because the assessment had only focused on the most positive aspects of the work, ignoring deficiencies and areas of weakness that might make the music less coherent, or demonstrate some inconsistency in technical and expressive control. Moderators reported this as the most common reason that the marking was outside tolerance, and the full sample had to be moderated in these circumstances.

Whilst moderators reported more examples of assessments that were accurate or within tolerance than last year, there were still a number that had been assessed with varying degrees of leniency/severity. Sometimes this was because the centre had automatically placed the assessments at the upper end of the mark bands, but where the criteria had not been convincingly fulfilled. In other cases there appeared to have been misunderstanding of the assessment criteria

and the application of standards exemplified in the standardising materials and the on-line exemplar materials that are available. This was particularly evident in cases where marks had been awarded in the 18 - 16 and 15 – 13 bands but the work did not demonstrate a sophisticated understanding, perhaps due to a lack of coherence or limited development of ideas due to extreme repetition. The most common example of this were songs written in repetitive four bar four chord structures. Some pieces used various “cut and paste” techniques, some particularly evident in Ternary structured compositions, with whole sections repeated. Other compositions copied a single bar a number of times with the resulting assessment stating a highly creative, or exceptionally creative use of rhythm and/or melody. Another common and recurring issue prevalent in piano writing was the use of block triads LH, and candidates who demonstrated little idea of the range and capabilities of the instrument. In these cases the music clearly required more work to sound finished, in order to demonstrate exceptional/high perception and insight, and moderators frequently needed to make adjustments into the 12 - 10 or 9 - 7 mark bands to more accurately reflect the quality of the work.

Centres are reminded that the assessment must be based on the student’s ability to compose. Assessment should be based on the evidence presented in the recording and the score/aural guide/lead sheet. Moderators reported examples where the assessments appeared to have been made in relation to the performance of the composition. The student had not been involved in the performance and the additional written evidence was very sparse, giving only very limited information from which even the most able performers would not be able to fulfil the intentions of the composer. The score/aural guide/lead sheet should be produced by the student, and if it is not in staff notation, must contain sufficient evidence to indicate that the recording is their own composition and not the composition of those contributing to the recording. Phrases such as, ‘I told my teacher what to sing so she could sing it for me’ does not provide sufficient evidence. In these cases, rather than telling the teacher what to sing, the students would have been better singing the parts themselves, thereby presenting the evidence required.

Assessment comments in the CRF

Many were completed in exemplary fashion with individual comments relating the criteria in the specification specifically to the work of each candidate. However, others had simply cut and pasted the same phrases for every candidate and did not relate the specific features of each piece to the criteria when awarding marks. Some of those who did, over-eulogised about areas of the composition, without taking into account less successful aspects, and then awarded a mark accordingly, leading to an imbalanced assessment. Some teachers referred to criteria from one mark band and then awarded a mark in another. Some teachers justified the assessments by listing all the ‘indicative examples’ that the students had used, regardless of whether or not they had been used successfully. There were some centres where there was no information apart from the marks provided.

It is appreciated that not all teachers were able to attend the standardising meetings offered this year. The composing standardising can be accessed in Secure Key Materials after the event has taken place.

Use of technology

In the specification great care has been taken to recognise the importance that technology plays in music, and this has been embedded into all three components to a much greater extent than ever before. There are however, some common pitfalls in using technology to compose, and these need to be considered carefully. The most common issues were:

- Sibelius composed songs where the vocal part was simply played back through Sibelius and often lacked melodic character. In many of these cases there was a lack of focus in the melodic vocal writing with some of the word setting being “uncomfortable”. Moderators reported a large number of these and commented that it was a pity that students did not feel able to sing their own work, or at least enlist someone else to do so.
- Similarly, there were many examples where Sibelius had been used to compose for instruments, but parts would be unplayable or outside specific instrumental ranges. The most common example being chords with three or four notes to be played on violin or cello.
- Examples of compositions for sequence based programmes such as Cubase, Garageband or Logic that relied too heavily on constant repetition of ideas with insufficient contrast, particularly where samples and loops had been ‘selected’ rather than composed.

Administration

It is pleasing to report that the vast majority of centres had taken great care to ensure that every aspect of the administration was completed to an extremely high standard.

CRFs were generally very well completed by candidates. Only a few candidates had left some or all of the page 2 options blank, and when this happened, usually matters were clarified in the programme notes. These notes were nearly always very informative, or certainly insightful. They certainly informed moderators, and greatly aided the moderation process overall.

Teachers’ responses to the first four bullet points were often duplicated for every candidate, and some simply contained “N/A”. Supporting comments for marks awarded were mixed and some were left totally blank. This final portion of the teacher section of the CRF should be seen as an opportunity for teachers to support candidates by linking specific features in the composition to the specific elements in the mark band within the assessment criteria. Some were superb, being highly insightful and helpful, and greatly informed the moderation process.

Teachers can greatly aid the moderation process by ensuring the following procedures are followed:

- CRFs should be checked to ensure they are complete, with all the required student/teacher signatures and dates. In particular, centres are encouraged to ensure that all students have selected at least two elements from each assessment grid and that the elements have been selected appropriately to reflect those used in the composition. Wherever possible, programme notes should be pasted into the CRF rather than presented as separate sheets.

Teacher comments relating to assessments should be specific to each individual student, not “cut and paste”.

- Ofqual requires that the two compositions should be a minimum of three minutes in duration. Centres should be careful not to confuse the track length of the recording with the length of the composition. Many students failed to satisfy the minimum duration due to this, specifically in instances where there were long pauses at the start and/or end of the recordings.
- Recordings were nearly always good quality. Centres are reminded that recordings should be submitted on unencrypted audio CD. MP3s should not be submitted. Moderators reported a variety of formats being received including USB drive and Data Discs containing MP3 Files, AiFF Files and WAV Files. CD recordings should be checked to ensure they have been finished properly and that they will play on standard audio equipment. Please ensure that the track numbers on the CRFs are accurate. Centres should enclose an accurate Tracklist. This is absolutely crucial when students submit compositions with aural guides.
- Centres should also ensure that each student submits the appropriate additional evidence, i.e. a fully completed programme note and a score, aural guide, lead sheet, or a combination of two or more of these, along with the recording. Examples of good practice can be accessed in the exemplar materials in e-AQA. Remember that the specification states that if composition documentation is not submitted for assessment with the audio recording, the audio recording of the final composition will still be accepted as assessment evidence. However, this will compromise how clearly the evidence supports the mark awarded by the centre, meaning centre marks are more likely to be adjusted at moderation.
- Take great care to ensure that the marks submitted in CMS tally with the marks on the CRFs.
- A fully completed Centre Declaration Sheet must be included with the sample of work.
- Wherever possible submit a single CD recording for the whole cohort, in candidate order, with the set brief composition first, followed by the free composition.
- Please avoid sending bulky folders. It is not necessary to include binders or use presentation documents. The CRF for each student with the relevant score attached with a paper clip, or put inside a clear plastic wallet/pocket, is adequate and facilitates moderation more easily.

Finally, teachers are reminded that all students should be made aware that the material they present in their composition should be their own original work and that plagiarism can lead to disqualification. Unfortunately, as in previous years some examples of plagiarism were discovered. If a student decides to use, for example, a sample or a theme that can be used for variation and development, they can legitimately declare this on the CRF.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.