



GCSE MUSIC

8271/CE NEA: Composing music
Report on the Examination

8271
June 2022

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Context

Every student's composition is a great achievement. It is an even greater achievement when considering the additional barriers to continuous musical learning created by the Coronavirus pandemic. In this context, there were some absolutely remarkable compositions, testament to the incredible work and support of our music teachers. Composition is a task that many students find difficult, as it requires the creative application of developed musical experience and understanding, as well as great courage and determination.

The requirements for June 2022

This year, there was a reduction in the amount of music students had to compose. Students had to submit one composition. They could choose one of the four composition briefs or a free composition. The composition had to demonstrate the selection and use of at least two types of musical elements from each group and create music with a minimum duration of 2 minutes.

Despite only needing to submit one composition, there was evidence in the student responses that the 2-minute duration created an additional challenge. In a normal series, students could submit two compositions of duration 1 minute 30 seconds each, to reach the minimum requirement of 3 minutes. There were examples of repeating material to ensure the (2-minute) minimum time was met, and a few students composed 'complete pieces', but where the minimum time was not met.

Free and brief compositions

A very high proportion of students chose to submit a free composition. Students composed in a range of styles. The vast majority met the requirement to specify a suggested audience or occasion, but the quality of these choices was mixed. Some responses were very vague, suggesting the music could be enjoyed anywhere and by anybody. This made it difficult to assess whether or not the music was appropriate for its intended purpose. It was also a missed opportunity. Students who gave a specific purpose for their music, often also referenced the study of similar music by other songwriters and composers, demonstrating a more advanced approach to their work. In some cases, it was possible to hear the influences and conventions they had found.

Brief composition responses were also composed in a range of styles, showing it is now more widely understood that the briefs are intended as a starting point only.

Brief 4, music suitable for performance at a stargazing event in an observatory, was the most popular choice.

Coursework receiving the top mark 36/36 was achieved by composers of both brief and free compositions. The mark was achieved for music composed in a wide variety of styles and genres, including, but not limited to:

- Contemporary Latin
- Jazz Fusion
- Piano Solo
- String Quartet
- Brass Band

- Popular Song
- EDM
- Film Orchestra
- Jazz
- Rock
- Solo instrument with piano accompaniment

The programme note

Many students struggled to write the programme note this summer. Most attempted the task, but many did not fully answer all three required points:

- the compositional intention, including the intended audience/occasion
- the types of musical element selected
- details of the software and hardware used in the compositional process

In the context of the examination, the purpose of the composition work is for students to demonstrate the level of their musical understanding. For each piece, they must submit:

- An audio recording, to demonstrate how the music should sound when performed or played using technology
- A score, to present the musical intentions in detail
- A 150-word programme note, to explain the intention, to describe how the composition was created and with which software or hardware, and to give more detail about their chosen musical features

These three aspects are all equally important and collectively provide the evidence to assess the level of a student's understanding and application of music through composition.

The score

Students can choose to present their score as:

- A staff notated score
- A lead sheet
- An aural guide

Students should choose which method will help them to most clearly demonstrate their intentions.

This summer there were some exceptional scores (of all three types), showing how the music was to be played, from start to finish. The overall structure of the music in these was helpfully presented and easy to follow. Students using Sibelius or other notation software included dynamics, tempo and articulation details, as well as performance directions (given as text annotations). Students creating their music using a DAW (like Logic Pro, GarageBand or Cubase etc.), presented a screenshot, annotated to describe how features in the music were introduced, changed or removed from one section to the next. The most advanced annotated scores showed an overall view on one page and then other screenshots to demonstrate specific features in the music. Students presenting a lead sheet of lyrics and chords included additional notes of how each section should be performed, as well as notated parts for the instruments others performed in the recordings.

Some scores were less helpful in showing the student's intentions. These did not include the title or the name of the composer. Some notated scores were presented showing only notes on the staff and without any other musical details. The most difficult scores to follow were those automatically created by a DAW, without any editing. In a few cases, the notated scores for these pieces were 60 or 70 pages long, with one bar printed on each page. In these situations, an annotated screenshot would have helped students to demonstrate their intentions more easily.

The use of technology

Technology was used in the process of almost every composition. In addition to the notation and DAW software noted above, online programs including BandLab, MuseScore and Soundtrap were also used by students this summer.

In the majority of work, students used technology well. A few students included pre-recorded loops in their work. Marks can only be awarded based on the music the student has created. So the use of loops is appropriate, and expected in some genres of music, but the student must have created their own loops.

Musical features for students to consider further

The following are musical features that some students did not demonstrate confident understanding of, within the context they had chosen to work:

- the structure of a melody
- harmonic rhythm
- cadences
- development and contrast
- harmony
- harmonic variation
- inversions
- planning an overall structure
- technical and expressive control
- texture
- rhythmic development
- modulation
- phrasing and articulation
- working with consonance and dissonance
- editing rhythm in a DAW

The selection and use of elements

The vast majority of students selected 2 or more musical elements from each group. More specifically, students either selected 2 from each group or they selected all the elements. Either is acceptable, however;

- students should select the elements during the process of composition
- students might find it helpful to use these lists to remind them of the musical features they are developing in their work

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- students should not be restricted to only choosing 2 elements from each group
 - students should only choose elements relating to their music

Understanding the process of assessment

Moderators reported the accuracy of centre marking was mixed this year. About half of all centres were marked within tolerance of the AQA standard. The other half were marked too harshly or too leniently to varying levels.

The most frequent problem was a misunderstanding of the marking bands. Some centres also only marked the elements selected by the students. Assessments must be holistic, considering every musical aspect of the piece.

Common inaccuracies in marking were due to:

- Awarding a mark in the 12-10 band when all the music ‘worked’ in context with the intended purpose, but where the music was too simplistic or there was not enough music created
- Awarding a mark in the 12-10 band when there were incoherent aspects, most commonly relating to harmony
- Awarding a mark in the 15-13 band or higher when there was no sense of development or change during the music or there was not technical and expressive control throughout
- Awarding a mark in the 18-16 band when there was not a consistent sense of musical complexity throughout the piece

A ‘guide of how assessment for composition works at GCSE for new and returning teachers’ will be available in the autumn to provide further support to teachers and students. In addition there will be an online GCSE Music training event open to all teachers on 12th October 2022.

The teacher’s comment

The teacher’s comment on the candidate record form is a vital part of the assessment process. It is an opportunity to justify the musical qualities of the composition in context with the marking bands. Moderators always consider these comments as part of the marking process.

There were some excellent teacher’s comments in this series. However, many other comments did not mention the marking bands, instead just listing musical features. Some teachers did not include a comment at all.

Administration

A change for this series was the opportunity to deliver the audio files on a composite, non-encrypted USB pen drive. Most centres submitted their audio tracks in this way and the work was easy to access for moderators. Some centres submitted Audio CDs and this continues to be acceptable.

It has been 3 years since centres last posted samples to moderators as part of the assessment process, so under the circumstances, some disruptions were expected. There were many parts of centre submissions missing, which delayed moderation. The main problems were:

- Centres did not include a Centre Declaration Sheet (CDS), or the sheet was not completed and signed
- The USB/CD were not labelled with the student names and student numbers, or some students work was missing
- The composition sample was posted to the wrong moderator
- The candidate record forms were not signed by the teacher and the student
- The mark entered on centre marks submission was different to the mark written on the CRF
- Music software files were sent, instead of audio files

The new guidance document (mentioned above), will include a checklist to support all students and teachers as they prepare for moderation in the next series.

A final note about the importance of the work being of the student

It is always a privilege to listen to a composition created by a student. This represents a part of their musical journey, based on their unique experience and understanding so far.

Moderators reported more instances than before of teachers providing direct help to students in their compositions. All instances of help were declared by the teacher and confirmed by the student, but occasionally the level of help made it difficult to assess the work of the student.

It's very important that students make all decisions relating to their composition coursework. This includes choosing:

- the purpose/audience/occasion of a free composition
- which of the 4 brief compositions they will focus on
- which instruments or voices they will compose for
- which key(s) to compose in
- the method of composition (i.e. which music software to use, or pen/pencil and paper if preferred)
- which elements they will focus on in each group

...and all others of the many, many possible musical decisions.

Marks can only be awarded for the music the student has created.

If another student or a teacher performs a part on the recording, there must be clear evidence of how the part was developed by the student in order to award them the marks for that part.

When giving feedback to students about their work, it is appropriate to tell them which band they've reached so far. It's helpful to use the statement 'based on the evidence of the music you've created...', as essentially that is what the assessment is looking for. The student is creating musical evidence to demonstrate their level of musical understanding.

It is appropriate to study the student's chosen genre with them.

It is appropriate to set a range of tasks in advance of, and during the creation of coursework, to help them to develop their understanding.

It is not appropriate to show them in detail how to improve their final coursework.

For example,

An appropriate teacher comment to the student during the process of composition;
“You’re doing a great job. There’s a clear sense of structure and your melody and harmony parts work well together. The melody is very simple, which is not necessarily a weakness, but currently the melody is quite repetitive. Based on the evidence so far, I estimate you would receive a mark in the 9-7 band for both groups.”

An inappropriate teacher comment to the same student during the process of composition;
“You’re doing a great job. At the moment you would get a mark in the 9-7 band. To improve the mark, change the D in bar 2 to an F#, and add some triplets and dotted notes to make the melody more complex. Put an A7 chord in bar 15 and a D chord in bar 16. I would also add a cello”

The ‘appropriate example’ above, is also a good example of how to approach the ‘teacher’s comment’ on the CRF.

Thank you

If you are reading this report as a parent, carer, teacher or school leader connected to any of the young people who were students of AQA GCSE Music for summer 2022, thank you for everything you have done to support and encourage them. You are so much appreciated.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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