



GCSE MUSIC

8271/W Understanding music
Report on the Examination

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General comments

This component is worth 40% of GCSE marks (96 marks), with the content organised into four areas of study:

1. Western classical tradition 1650 - 1910
2. Popular music
3. Traditional music
4. Western classical tradition since 1910.

Each area of study (AoS) contains four topic areas and specified study pieces. The examination is in two sections and lasts 1 hour 30 minutes.

Section A comprises questions based around short excerpts of music taken from all four areas of study. There are two questions on each area of study and, together, each pair of questions will be worth 17 marks. 48 of the 68 marks available in Section A assess AO3 while the remaining 20 marks assess AO4, focussing on the context within which some of the different excerpts were written. This section covers understanding of musical elements, musical language, and an appreciation of the context in which music was composed.

Section B is worth 28 marks in total. Candidates answer **two** questions, each worth 14 marks. The questions are based on the study pieces.

Question 9 Mozart Clarinet Concerto in A major, K. 622, 3rd movement, Rondo **is compulsory**.

Then, candidates choose to answer **one** of the three remaining questions on either:

Little Shop of Horrors 1982 off-Broadway version – the following three tracks:

- Prologue/Little Shop of Horrors (overture)
- Mushnik and Son
- Feed Me

Paul Simon Graceland album – the following three tracks:

- Graceland
- Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes
- You Can Call Me Al

Zoltán Kodály: Battle and Defeat of Napoleon and Intermezzo from Háry János.
(Orchestral version with cimbalon and without vocal parts.)

Each question has four parts, the first three requiring short answers (2 marks) and the final question requiring an extended response (8 marks).

The areas of study provide an appropriate focus for students to appraise, develop and demonstrate in-depth knowledge and understanding of musical elements, musical context and musical language. It is important to remember that the context within which the music was written is very important and this should underpin all studies.

Advance Information

To compensate for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the subsequent loss of teaching time, all exam boards were asked to produce Advance Information (AI). This comprised a list of which parts of each Area of Study would be tested in Section A and help with the focus of the extended writing question in Section B.

Section A: Questions 01 – 08

This section had questions assessing the recognition of:

cadences, dynamics, effects, form, harmonic devices, intervals, melody, playing techniques, rhythm, sonority (timbre), structure, tempo, texture, time signatures, tonality and types of chords.

Each question was linked directly to a musical excerpt. There were two questions involving staff notation:

- 4.6 was a multiple-choice question where students had to choose the rhythm being played
- 6.2 where students were required to fill in four missing notes with the rhythm given.

Other question types included short answer questions, multiple choice question and ‘features’ questions.

It is worth noting in the ‘features’ questions candidates can gain full credit by answering correctly from only one musical element.

For example, in 4.3

- Identify two features of melody **and/or** textures used in this excerpt typical of Minimalist music

Candidates could provide two melody responses, or two texture responses, or indeed, one melody and one texture response.

Candidates and teachers are reminded that the phrase ‘used in this excerpt’ is equally important, as this means that some generic features might not necessarily always apply.

Question 01

The first two excerpts on the paper were from popular music (AoS2). Excerpt A was *Rockaria!* by The Electric Light Orchestra and Excerpt B was *Tim McGraw* by Taylor Swift.

The opening questions of 01.1 and 01.2 on ‘glissando’ and the ‘distortion’ were not particularly well answered by candidates, with a range of vague and incorrect responses given for the guitar effect. However, 01.3 saw most candidates achieve either one or two marks for their responses. Popular and correct answers for ‘rhythm’ responses were ‘repeated/repetitive rhythms’ and/or ‘syncopation’ Most candidates correctly identified the

‘melody and accompaniment’ texture.

Excerpt B proved a high-scoring and popular excerpt, with candidates gaining good marks in 01.4 and 01.5. However, full mark responses describing ‘melodic movement’ were rare and a lot of answers were characterised by responses not connected to ‘melody’.

Question 02

Question 02 featured a piece of piano music by Schumann *The Poet Speaks* and Dvorak’s *Pie Jesu* from his Requiem. Frequent (incorrect) answers for ‘naming an ornament’ (02.1) included trill, but the vast majority were able to correctly identify the cadence (02.3) and the tonality (02.4).

The first two questions in Excerpt B on ‘family of instruments’ and ‘type of choir’ singing were very well answered by most candidates. However, some candidates incorrectly used the word ‘wind’ (rather than woodwind) to describe the instrumental family.

The interval question (02.7) proved more problematic. Centres should note that when an interval is asked for, it is always a one-mark question and all that is required is the number of the interval heard. Candidates who qualify their response risk negating an otherwise correct answer. Indeed, examiners reported that this was a common occurrence in this type of question.

Most candidates were able to correctly identify the very slow/slow tempo in the 02.8 features question, but a significant number of vague responses such as ‘simple rhythms’, ‘steady rhythms’ or ‘constant rhythms’ were reported.

Question 03

Question 3 featured music from the traditional music area of study (AoS 3). Excerpt A was from *Wonderful World* by Jimmy Cliff. The questions on the ‘number of different chords’ (03.1) and ‘beats of bar’ (03.2) were answered well by candidates, but the ‘note of the scale’ question (03.3) and naming the ‘stringed instrument’ (03.4) proved challenging, with significant responses for each of these two questions being incorrect.

Excerpt B was from Calan’s *Deio I Dywyn*. The ‘features’ question attracted a range of correct answers here, with candidates choosing (on the whole) to provide answers across the three elements listed. Popular (and correct) responses included ‘ornamentation’, ‘Allegro’/fast tempo’ and the identification of both the ‘violin/fiddle’ and the ‘accordion’.

Question 04

Question 4 focussed on music of the Western classical tradition since 1910 (AoS 4), beginning with an excerpt of part of Adam’s *Wild Nights* from Harmonium. The opening rhythm and dynamics questions were well-answered overall, and indeed, the ‘features’ question saw many candidates correctly identifying two different textures. Other frequent melodic responses were ‘repeated/repetitive phrases’ and ‘ostinato’.

Excerpt B was the Allegro molto from Bartok’s *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. Again, students appeared to find the identification of intervals challenging. This interval of a third gave rise

to a very wide range of responses, covering virtually all intervals within the octave. The simple 'third/3rd' response was all that was required to gain the one available mark but, again, potentially correct responses were negated by the addition of an invalid refinement.

The notation question of 04.6 and 'identifying the correct tempo' (04.7) had a significant number of incorrect responses.

Question 05

Excerpt A (05.1) featured an excerpt from the Halo soundtrack Devils ... Monsters ... A high number of responses gained at least one or two marks here, and it was pleasing to note the perceptive responses by many candidates.

Excerpt B turned to the music of Broadway from the 1950s to the 1990s, with an excerpt from Close Every Door to Me by Andrew Lloyd Webber. These questions were all well-answered, apart from the interval question (05.4), which unfortunately had very few correct responses.

Question 06

Question 06 included the staff notation question, which was focussed on an excerpt taken from Handel's Coronation Anthem The King Shall Rejoice. Candidates were required to add in four notes at their correct pitches, using the rhythm provided. This type of question remains an issue for a significant number of candidates, both in terms of being able to correctly identify pitches and of the lack of precision of notating music correctly on the staff.

The orchestral music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven was the basis of Excerpt B (06.3) taken from the Mozart's Jupiter Symphony. A considerable number of candidates achieved full marks on this question, with the greatest number of responses being taken from the 'tonality' and sonority(timbre) elements.

Question 07

Contemporary Latin music was the focus for 07.1, 07.2 and 07.3. However, this topic was omitted from the Advance Information which was sent to centres. For this reason, full marks were awarded to all candidates for these questions.

Excerpt B was an excerpt from Reckless Blues by Bessie Smith. The first two questions on a 'feature' of the vocal line (07.4) and the 'effect of the mute' (07.5) proved challenging for many candidates, with a considerable number of vague responses reported. However, the final three questions (07.6-07.8) were answered strongly by many candidates, with the 'call and response' answer being a frequent response.

Question 08

The final question in Section A included two more excerpts from the Western classical tradition since 1910 (AoS 4). Excerpt A was taken from Britten's Rejoice in the Lamb - Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues.

Most candidates correctly identified the correct texture of the vocal parts at the start (08.1) and a significant number of correct responses identifying the accompanying instruments (08.2) were given. Question 08.3 on dynamics was reasonably well answered overall, but some vague responses were reported by examiners.

Excerpt B was taken from Malcolm Arnold's Tom O'Shanter Overture. The harmonic device question, which was focus of 08.4 was frequently incorrectly answered. In many responses, it appeared that the term was simply not understood. The correct answer was either 'pedal' or 'drone'. Likewise, the shrill sound of the 'piccolo' (asked for in 08.5) produced a variety of mainly incorrect responses, with many candidates mistaking the sound for a flute.

The final AoS 4 question in Section A asked for the identification of 'three features of metre, rhythm and/or sonority (timbre) used in this excerpt typical of 20th century music'. It was pleasing to note that many candidates were able to identify the change of metre, and stronger answers highlighted the prominent use of either brass or percussion instruments, or the fact that it was played by a large orchestra.

Section B: Questions 09 - 12

Questions in this section are based on the new study pieces named in the specification. No excerpts are played, and no scores are allowed into the examination room. There is no requirement for candidates to make any reference to bar numbers in responses, but where they do examiners do check the location point given for accuracy.

All students must answer Question 09, based on Area of Study 1. Students are then required to choose one of the remaining questions: 10, 11 or 12.

From the optional study works the two most popular choices were on Little Shop of Horrors and Paul Simons' Graceland.

Each of the questions in Section B began with three questions worth two marks each. Most candidates gave two answers for each question.

In the eight-mark questions, points made by candidates had to be linked to the focus of the question. In 09.4 this was 'appealing to an audience', 10.4 was 'excitement' in 11.4 'fusion of Western and African music' and in 12.4 'drama'.

A significant number of responses failed to focus on these key words. Additionally, responses were reported where candidates seemed to simply list all the information candidates might know about the study piece, regardless of the key word or musical elements asked about in the question. Whilst credit was given for valid points made, a noticeable number of candidates seemed to write a lot for little credit. Additionally, there is no need for a lengthy introduction.

Question 09

Question 09 was based on Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A major in D major, K.622 for AoS 1.

Question 09.1 asked for two ways in which the horns were used in the movement. While many responses identified two ways, the fact that more than two were often given tended to mean, in

several instances, that both marks could not be awarded, for example, in cases where the second way given was incorrect. Additionally, there were a noticeable number of vague responses. Given that the horns are the only brass instruments used in the piece, correct candidates' responses were perhaps best described as 'mixed' overall.

Question 09.2 asked for two ornaments and common correct answers involved 'trill', 'acciaccatura' and 'appoggiatura'. This question was well-answered by candidates.

Question 09.3 focussed on the fact that there are two different keys used in the second episode of the movement. Most candidates correctly identified D/D major, but some candidates were unable to be credited for a response of F# (rather than F# minor).

There was a wide range of approaches to 09.4 but careful planning and how musical elements are used is key to presenting a strong response to this type of question: Many did this, whether relatively concisely or at some length. 'Harmony, melody, rhythm and/or sonority (timbre)' were the elements asked about and these gave ample scope for making clear points concerning the appeal of the music to an audience.

Question 10

Question 10 focussed on the three songs by Menken from Little Shop of Horrors 1982 off-Broadway version, beginning with a textures question in Mushnik and Son (Q10.1) This was answered well by candidates, with most achieving full marks.

Question 10.2 was a more challenging question and thus successful answers were more limited from candidates.

Question 10.3 attracted a variety of incorrect answers for naming two musical styles in 'Feed Me' with 'pop' being a common incorrect response. Most candidates were able to obtain at least one mark with an answer of 'rock' music.

As already mentioned, the key word in 10.4 was here was 'excitement' in the song only and not the Prologue. Popular responses from candidates were references to the (melody) of 'hook', pentatonic vocal harmonies, (some) chromatic notes, as well as the (rhythm) calypso/tresillo/332 rhythm in the bass, syncopation, naming the instruments and three female backing singers (sonority/timbre) and the G major bright key/'bubble gum' pop reference.

Question 11

Question 11 focussed on the three songs by Paul Simon specified as the study piece for AoS 3.

Question 11.1 was a straightforward question, requiring students to identify two woodwind instruments used in the song You Can Call Me Al. Most students scored well on this question.

Question 11.2 asked for two features of the bass guitar solo again in the song You Can Call Me Al. There was a pleasing range and variety of correct responses with 'palindromic', 'improvised/improvised feel' and 'monophonic' proving popular, correct answers.

Question 11.3 similarly was well-answered, although a noticeable number of candidates did confuse Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes with one of the other Paul Simon study pieces not asked about in the question.

Question 11.4 asked candidates to ‘explain how Paul Simon used ‘harmony, melody, sonority (timbre) and/or texture to create a fusion of Western and African music in the song Graceland.’

As with the other extended answer questions, to show coherence and logic, students must not only identify a point but must explain how it has relevance to the question. Many students successfully referred to the (melody) of the Graceland ‘major third’, ‘repetitive melodies’, (harmony) individual chords and ‘changes of the rate of harmonic change’ in the verse/chorus as well as (sonority (timbre)) referring to the ‘pedal steel guitar’ and ‘Everly Brothers backing vocals. Finally, the use of ‘melody and accompaniment’ and ‘call and response’ textures were referenced well by many.

Question 12

Question 12 was based on Kodály’s two study pieces specified from Háy János.

The three shorter questions Section B were based upon the Battle and Defeat of Napoleon.

Question 12.1 was a context question and asks candidates to ‘identify two features of twentieth-century music’. This provided a wide range of correct responses, with ‘the use of the saxophone’, ‘large/extended orchestra’ and the use of ‘modes’ recurring frequently.

Question 12.2 was a straight-forward question on naming the two ‘families of instruments’. Most candidates scored at least one mark.

Question 12.3 focused on ‘two features of the accompaniment’ in the final section. Most candidates again gained at least one mark for ‘morendo/dying away (or it’s equivalent).

The final question, 12.4, moved the focus to Intermezzo, and asked for an explanation of how Kodály used ‘articulation, dynamics, melody and/or structure to achieve a sense of drama. Students found a lot to write about, indeed there were many perceptive and strong responses to this question, showing both breadth and depth of knowledge.

Final comments

Students should be encouraged to consider the following:

- aural recognition of ornaments
- understanding/vocabulary of the particular musical element being asked about
- ensuring the quality of responses involving musical notation, namely the dictation question (06.2) and the multiple-choice rhythm question (04.6)
- avoiding vague responses to rhythm questions such as ‘constant rhythms’, ‘simple rhythms’, ‘steady rhythms’ or even ‘upbeat rhythms’

- avoid exceeding the number of 'features' requested in the question (sometimes students made different 'element' points on each of the numbered answer lines)
- avoid confusion between 'harmony' and 'tonality' elements
- avoid confusion between 'metre' and 'rhythm' elements
- only write about the elements which are asked about in the extended eight-mark questions
- avoid writing a lengthy introduction which repeats the question in the extended eight-mark questions
- producing a clear, coherent structure in the extended eight-mark questions.

It was obvious that students were engaged by the variety of musical excerpts in Section A and responded well, right through to the end of Question 08. Equally, the questions on the new study pieces in Section B demonstrated evidence of close study during the course, with some very good responses to the questions based on the compulsory and optional study pieces.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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