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# A-LEVEL MUSIC

7272/C Non-exam assessment  
Report on the Examination

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7272/C  
June 2023

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## General Comments

This was the first time that the full NEA requirements of this unit were examined since 2019. As in 2019, students were required to complete **two** compositions (one of which was in response to the range of briefs published in September 2022), with a total duration of **four and a half minutes**. In virtually every case, this requirement was met. Where the time duration did not meet requirements, a penalty was applied to the overall mark on a sliding scale.

As has been reported before, the range of creative responses from students draws on an ever-widening set of influences and sources of inspiration. At its best, this work was not only engaging and technically assured, but also thought-provoking and sometimes deeply moving. This has again made for an interesting process of marking and sampling.

## Composition to a Brief

Composing to a brief was again made compulsory in 2023 and, as in previous series, examiners saw examples of all briefs. Chorales were, again, the most popular choice here, with nearly half of submissions choosing to respond to the two given exercises. Brief 2 was next popular, with around a fifth of students responding to the given task. Briefs 4 and 5 were also well represented and, as in previous years, Brief 6 was the least popular option.

Brief infringement was less prevalent this year than in previous series. Nevertheless, it is important for students to read the given prescriptions carefully and to ensure that their submissions meet them all. There is a section of the mark scheme with descriptors that range from “Rudimentary use is made of the Brief” up to “Imaginative use of the Brief fundamentally informs the composition”. Therefore, before beginning the task of composition it is in students’ interests to take time to consider the possibilities of the brief and various approaches that might be taken. The best work always took these parameters and transcended them in a creative and imaginative way.

Although infringements on the brief tended to be minor where they occurred (for example, omitting one of the instruments required or slightly altering the given musical material), these still occurred more frequently than is ideal and, in most cases, this would have affected the mark awarded. This will, of course, always affect consideration of the mark scheme where it relates to meeting the brief at the very least. Students are therefore urged to check that they understand all that is required for the brief and to ensure that they meet these requirements. A mention in the programme note, annotations in the score or comments in an aural guide can help the examiner to see exactly where given material has been used (particularly useful this year for brief 5).

Several briefs give a context or occasion for the performance of the piece created, eg a live pop concert, an embassy gathering or an art exhibition. Some responses took note of all the technical and musical restrictions but gave little thought for the occasion for which they were composing. Most notably, this resulted in music for Brief 2 that relied heavily on electronic production techniques that would be nearly impossible to replicate live in a concert, or music that didn’t quite match the calm and considered atmosphere of an art gallery.

## Brief 1: Chorales

As has consistently been the case, this brief is split into two exercises (Chorale 1 and Chorale 2). Chorale 1 provides soprano and bass lines, whereas Chorale 2 is a given melody only. Both exercises need to be completed as four-part harmonisations for Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass.

As in previous series, there was a small handful of occasions where the given material was altered or miscopied in some way by students. This inevitably led to some unforced problems and it should be reiterated that the given soprano/bass lines should not be altered. It is also worth students checking the given parts back against the question paper before attempting to work the exercises.

Although students may choose whether to submit their chorales in open or closed score, closed score submissions (two staves, with Soprano and Alto on the treble staff and Tenor and Bass on the bass staff) tended to show greater control and technical fluency. Writing in open score presents a greater challenge and hardly any of the small number of submissions of this type profited from the choice.

Most chorale submissions demonstrated a degree of knowledge of appropriate technique and style. Examiners look for evidence of:

- The ability to modulate
- In exercise 2, good choices of keys in the wider tonal context of the chorale
- Strong cadences, with stylistic details such as suspensions or passing sevenths
- Idiomatic (ie singable) writing for the individual voice parts, as well as good spacing amongst them in the formation of chords
- Quaver enrichment, usually through suspensions and passing notes (auxiliary notes tend to be less idiomatic than these, but can be made to be effective)
- In exercise 2, a strong and purposeful bass line, using a combination of conjunct and disjunct movement and driving progressions forward with interest.

Technical errors commonly found in solutions included the following:

- Consecutive 5ths and octaves (including those that occurred by contrary motion), as well as consecutive unisons
- Unprepared dissonances (4ths, 7ths and 9ths)
- Dissonances (4ths, 7ths and 9ths) that fail to resolve downwards appropriately
- Awkward melodic intervals, such as augmented 4ths, 5ths and 2nds or, in some contexts, diminished 4ths and 5ths (these can both be acceptable if the note following the diminished interval moves back on itself by a semitone, eg C - F# - G – especially in a bass line). Unidiomatic diatonic 7ths (major and minor) were also found
- Wide spaces (greater than an octave) between Soprano and Alto or Alto and Tenor, leading to poorly spaced chords
- Inappropriate doubling of the major 3<sup>rd</sup> in chords (this can be acceptable in some cases, such as parts arriving on the third via contrary motion, or in an IVb-V<sup>7</sup>b-I/i progression, where IVb might have a doubled major 3<sup>rd</sup> to avoid other part-writing problems)
- Unsuitable use of second inversion chords
- Use of diminished triads in root position
- Overlapping of voices (both within a chord – alto below tenor, for example – and where a voice leaps above or below an adjacent voice on the next beat, such as an alto moving to a note that is below the soprano but above the soprano's **previous** note)
- Bass notes unmoving from one beat to the next (especially before and after a barline) – though the intensification of that unmoving bassline by, for example, a suspension or a V<sup>7</sup>d chord is acceptable and stylistic.

Whilst the “passing 6/4” is a perfectly acceptable progression, the passing 6/3 (linking two I and Ib with vii<sup>o</sup>b) is arguably more stylish and often allows for a 7-6 suspension to be deployed.

It should also be reiterated that chorales have, as their basis, sung hymn tunes. Although not stated, the melody has an implied text and therefore the number of syllables in the soprano should be matched by those found in the lower parts. A lack of consideration for this resulted in needless repeated notes and over-long notes.

Tempo is an important compositional decision in chorales, as it can demonstrate that students have thought about the appropriate speed for their solutions. Many students did this well, for example an intricate solution at a slow tempo. However, there are still some submissions that simply use the default tempo of the chosen score writing package, which can lead to a very breathless or “garbled” realisation in the recording. Conversely, there were some incredibly slow tempo realisations that were not merited by the detail in the solutions. It is wise to be pragmatic here. If chorales are chosen, a longer free composition is likely necessary to make up the required time length for the total submission. This is something students should plan for. Outside of those working with close synchronisation with another medium (such as in film or TV music), tempo choice should always be fundamentally musical, rather than mathematical.

### **Chorale 1 (soprano and bass given)**

This exercise was in B flat major and the implied cadences were generally well spotted:

Bar 2	Perfect in F
Bar 4	Perfect in B flat
Bar 6-7	Perfect in G minor
Bar 8-9	Imperfect in F
Bar 11	Perfect in B flat
Bar 12-13	Perfect in C minor
Bar 15	Imperfect in B flat
Bar 17	Perfect in B flat

There were a couple of awkward moments that students needed to negotiate in this exercise. Going from b.2 to b.3 made part-crossing or parallel 5ths a real danger, and the least offensive solution here was probably to end b.2 with Soprano and Alto sharing the F.

Bars 6-7 required students to think carefully about how to handle the minims in both parts going into the cadence. There was an opportunity for movement in the inner parts here and many students seized upon this opportunity. An ic-V-i cadence was a logical choice here, though a decorated V (perhaps with a suspension and some passing movement) was also possible. Treating all parts in minims at this point disrupts the rhythmic flow of the chorale and is not an advisable option.

Some students chose to treat b.8-9 as a perfect cadence in F, but the E flat in the bass in b.8<sup>3</sup> means this involves an aurally jarring false relation. A similar effect occurred with the handful of students who chose to deploy a C major chord at the start of b.13, with the E flat in the bass at the end of the bar similarly creating a false relation against E natural.

In b.13, the E flat in the bass could be handled by using vii<sup>o</sup>c or V<sup>7</sup>d. Most students offered the latter and, although the 7<sup>th</sup> is not prepared here, it is a stylish and compelling way to bring the music back to the tonic key.

Most students in this exercise saw opportunities to use stylish cadences and sought to offer variety amongst them. Many also saw the opportunities for suspensions, but some caution should be

offered here. Suspensions are a strong stylistic trait of chorales but can be overused, to the point that they lose their expressive quality and become predictable. This is especially true at cadences where students routinely chose to place a suspension over both chord V and chord I/i.

### **Chorale 2 (soprano given)**

This E flat major chorale offered significant challenges, as most phrases could be harmonised within the tonic key (the exceptions being those in bars 8 and 10). Additionally, two of the cadences (bars 12 and 16) have minims before the fermata, suggesting an opportunity to use two different chords under the given melody.

Given that so many phrases could be harmonised in the tonic (including the last four cadences), it was important for students to have a good tonal plan for solving the exercise. The most ambitious solutions employed a wide range of keys and cadence types (including a Phrygian cadence in b.16). However, it was disappointing that even some of the most adventurous in terms of chord choice and part-writing still opted to harmonise at least three of the last four phrases in E flat major.

Another consideration with the second exercise is the issue of passing modulation. There were numerous opportunities for passing modulation in Chorale 2 and, whilst not all students will have the confidence to explore this, it is something that can make the best solutions stand out.

The **first phrase** (anacrusis - b.2<sup>3</sup>) was harmonised by most students as a perfect cadence in E flat, though some opted to modulate to C minor for the cadence (which is perfectly acceptable, particularly if choosing perfect in E flat at the next cadence). Given that the second phrase is one that also could suggest a perfect cadence in the tonic, some students chose to deploy an interrupted cadence at this point. Although this makes some strategic sense with the following phrase, it should be noted that interrupted cadences are relatively rare and especially if used early on. The anacrusis offered an opportunity to consider whether to change harmony over the barline (many students did, with I – Vb or I – Ib being very common). Options at the cadence included Ic – V – I and Ib – V – I, but various other solutions were offered, including modulating to the relative minor.

The **second phrase** (b.2<sup>4</sup> – 4<sup>3</sup>) was treated by most students as a perfect cadence in the tonic (with a familiar ii<sup>7</sup>b – V – I cadence formula), but it was also possible to modulate to C minor here (IVb – V<sup>7</sup>b – i). The descending melodic contour in b.3 presented an opportunity for a chain of suspensions and/or a contrary motion rising bass line.

The **third phrase** (b.4<sup>4</sup> – 6<sup>3</sup>) offered opportunity for passing modulation in b.5 (to either E flat or C minor, depending on where students cadenced in the second phrase). The most likely key and cadence combination here was perfect in B flat, though care needed to be taken with the lower auxiliary in the first beat of b.6.

The **fourth phrase** (b.6<sup>4</sup> – 8) was most commonly treated as ending in C minor, but an imperfect cadence in B flat was also possible here, especially once the A flat of b.7 had been safely negotiated.

The **fifth phrase** (b.9 – 10<sup>3</sup>) could be treated as a perfect cadence in C minor or as an imperfect cadence in B flat. Opportunity for passing modulation was possible at the start of this phrase, to either B flat or G minor. Again, the lower auxiliary at the beginning of b.10 required some thought in order to avoid errors.

The **sixth phrase** (b.10<sup>4</sup> – 12<sup>3</sup>) was treated by most in the tonic key of E flat, but it was possible to construct imperfect cadences in C minor, F minor or even A flat here (though the latter requires a late modulation and some skill to make this work).

The **seventh phrase** (b.12<sup>4</sup> – 14) again offered the opportunity for a perfect cadence in C minor or E flat, meaning that students had the option of choosing which would fit their preferred tonal plan. An interrupted cadence in E flat was also possible here, and arguably a more sensible place for this rare cadence if it is to be used at all.

The **penultimate phrase** (b.14<sup>4</sup> – 15<sup>3</sup>) again needed careful thought, especially as the melody is largely the same as the second phrase. Students therefore had an opportunity to handle this melody in a slightly different way, whilst the end of the phrase offered a chance to use a Phrygian cadence (in either C minor or F minor) in place of a more obvious (and tonally less logical) perfect cadence in the tonic. Given that there are so many obvious chances for C minor elsewhere, a move to the flatter minor key sets up a particularly satisfying last phrase, with the anacrusis of the last phrase used as a V<sup>7</sup>b and b.17 closing F minor before cadencing firmly in E flat.

The **final phrase** (b.15<sup>4</sup> – end) is the only phrase which necessitated being handled as a perfect cadence in E flat and, given the similarity to the second half of the second phrase, it was again an opportunity for students to do something slightly different. A surprising number of students did not choose to drop the bass to a bottom E flat at the end of the chorale and, whilst not an error, there is a satisfaction to be gained from withholding this pitch until the final cadence that is quite stylistic. Use of secondary dominants before the cadence were seen in some students and a passing modulation via F minor or A flat is possible at the start of the phrase.

## Brief 2

This brief invited students to compose a song in funk style, to be performed at a pop concert. There was a provided bass line and chord progression, which had to be included within the composition. In addition, there was a stipulation of the instrumentation for the song (which could be conceived with or without a vocal line). After chorales, this was the next most popular brief this year, with nearly a fifth of students offering this option.

The best students had a strong grasp of funk style, finding suitable comping patterns to complement the given bass in either keyboard (usually an electric piano) or guitar and a strong drum beat that emphasised the downbeat. Wah-wah, phasing and flanging effects were used to enhance the sense of style and there were some imaginative horn licks (combining moments in both octaves and harmony) used to support the groove. Funk is a sub-genre that spans the late 1960s to the 1980s and beyond, and students were able to demonstrate affiliation to one or more of these styles. As with any composition, care with structure, and a balance of variety and consistency in the original ideas were factors that could support a creative use of the given material.

Weaker submissions for this brief tended to show less confidence in the funk idiom, with most of the rhythmic character coming from the given bassline and little attention given to the arrangement in helping to lay down a suitable groove. With a given chord progression and bassline, there was an over-reliance on this material in many weaker students, tending not to vary the ideas, or even repeating the material beyond its natural welcome. Equally telling in weaker submissions was the lack of technical control over harmony or bass line in sections which did not use the given material, leading to pieces where the most successful sections derived ultimately from what students were given.

Typical infringements to the brief here were mainly down to the instrumentation not being entirely followed (with some opting to put what sounded like horn stabs onto a separate keyboard part, rather than writing for live instruments), as well as by letting natural inclinations towards technology-based production to move away from the context of live performance cited in the rubric.

Although there was no time limit imposed on this brief, some submissions were overly long and unvaried, whilst some ended abruptly before they had really established themselves. Students would be well advised to consider the experience of listening to their music in real time and trying to judge where the natural length fits.

### **Brief 3**

Students were asked to compose music for a television broadcaster's coverage of a sports World Cup. A wide variety of host countries and sports (including chess) were explored here, though this particular challenge was not as popular as equivalent briefs in previous series. The phrase 'carpe diem' or its translation were to be set as part of responses, and various images for the coverage needed to be underscored as part of the composition, though the respective timings were at the liberty of the student (provided the whole piece did not exceed three minutes).

There seemed to be two main approaches taken to this brief. One was to use the host country as an inspiration for music that contained inflections and stylistic tropes that could be traced back to that country's associated music or repertoire. In this respect, there were some mixed successes: sometimes the musical associations lacked real stylistic character, or were too simplistic. Elsewhere, quotations were lifted from other pieces that were not successfully integrated into the whole. More successful examples that took this approach managed to infuse aspects of the country's musical heritage within a wider and more consistent style across the whole composition.

The second approach was to write music that was more generically associated with sports broadcasting and to downplay the individual host country. Music that took this approach frequently made use of standard tropes of sports competitions, using orchestral forces including strings, brass and timpani, elements borrowed from EDM or a fusion of multiple elements in a more filmic style.

Many approaches were taken in the setting of the given phrase 'carpe diem' or its English equivalent. Some used choir effectively, choosing to set the given phrase chorally and in repetition; others chose to chant the phrase with a solo voice. 'Carpe diem' was also used effectively to bookend the composition as a gesture that was by turns declamatory and conclusive. Some students chose to set texts that were in neither English nor Latin, which was not necessarily outside the brief so long as the given phrase was heard in one of the two prescribed languages.

Success in this brief was dependent on creating the correct mood and for writing strong responses to each image, whilst maintaining some kind of dramatic and stylistically coherent thread throughout. This was a challenge that some students rose to admirably; less successful responses found difficulty in creating a cohesive structure around the disparate images or in maintaining a convincing sense of style.

### **Brief 4**

Students were asked to write a song to occur towards the end of a musical. As in previous years, this was a popular option amongst the briefs and many students managed to carry off the sense of overcoming adversity with a suitably theatrical style. Lyrics and a chord progression were given, as well as a time restriction of three minutes.



There were some ingenious ways of incorporating the given progression into submissions, which showed real planning and engagement with the brief in considering how it might be worked into a coherent structure or larger musical paragraph. Some prefigured it with a variation; others chromatically altered the bass and harmonies, developing it into a less complex progression for verses/choruses. Some held back the progression until the end, giving it a prominence and inevitability that made a lot of dramatic sense.

There were various approaches to be taken here with the two voices to be used, and the brief allowed for one of these to be more prominent than the other. Where students chose to cast their compositions as a full duet, however, there was some limitation in the way the voices related to each other. Many passages were written in octaves or unison, and vocal texture was not always fully explored.

Students could write for an ensemble of their own choice of up to ten instruments. Here, arrangements varied considerably from the fluent to the superficial. Some students chose to write for piano alone, which represented a fairly secure but safe option; others wrote for larger groups of instruments but did not write idiomatically or efficiently for the forces chosen. At the other end, there were some very catchy and stylistically assured accompaniments, that both supported the vocal parts and enriched the overall dramatic experience.

Given that lyrics had been provided for a Verse and a Pre-Chorus, there was a heavy implication that a Chorus would be a logical addition to the structure. It was a surprising omission in some students' work. Creating a balanced and satisfying structure required some careful planning on the part of students in this brief. There were some inventive submissions including spoken introductions with gentle underscoring, genuinely uplifting and climactic choruses, and outros that dissipated some of the triumph to allow for a really uplifting ensemble conclusion.

## **Brief 5**

Students were asked to write a quintet for performance at a jazz café. A range of instruments as possible combo constituents was offered, and the piece was required to make use of three given rhythms. There was a further requirement for notated solos for at least two of the chosen instruments.

Examiners saw some very accomplished jazz writing in this brief, as well as some offerings that were stylistically more dilute. With only rhythmic elements being stipulated in the given material, there was an opportunity here for students to choose their own structure and sets of changes. Many crafted a distinctive head melody that returned after the solos; some wrote intros in straight rhythm before breaking into swing in the main body of the composition; others were inspired by specific composers and their approaches to the quintet.

Characteristics that marked out the strongest students included:

- a keen sense of writing for horns both in ensemble and as soloists, with some idiomatic writing
- sensitive handling of the rhythm section, both in response within itself and to soloists as necessary
- reconciliation of bass lines between bass and left-hand piano (where used), and agreement of harmony in thicker textures
- a coherent structure that led to a satisfying musical experience.

This was another brief where the live context of a café performance was not always grasped.

## **Brief 6**

This brief was attempted by the fewest students this year. There were several technical features required (contrasting sections, drone(s), regular and irregular metre) as well as the requirement to write within one of the given modes. With the restriction on instruments and a given occasion for which to write, this was perhaps one of the more prescriptive briefs this year. This can be an advantage to students who respond well to given restrictions or who need some steering.

On the whole, students responded well to this brief and were able to meet the numerous requirements. It's worth pointing out, however, that the occasion was the celebration of a national culture at an embassy – not all the submissions appeared to take this into account.

## **Brief 7**

The challenge to write a chamber piece in response to a given image using a mode proved fruitful for a small proportion of students, with some very imaginative compositions heard. The given mode, which was a sort of hybrid of the whole-tone and octatonic scales, yielded a lot of interesting harmonies and melodies, whilst also grounding the music in a recognisably 20<sup>th</sup>-century stylistic space. Students found the three semitones G# - A – B flat fruitful, whilst also appreciating the “tonic-dominant” relationship of having D and A within the mode.

Some students had missed the stipulation that there should be at least one transposition of the mode to a new harmonic region. For those that did attempt this, the harmonic region sounded “newer” if a semitonal shift was used, rather than (for example) up a tone, due to the number of common pitches found on a mode that is largely based on whole tones. Transposing the mode onto A (as the “dominant” pitch) also worked well.

The combination of a visual stimulus and the mode elicited some interesting musical responses, with some students finding imaginative ways of capturing the swirling colours and curved lines of the painting. However, not all responses really suited the atmosphere of a gallery, or felt like they had a direct link to the painting. It was as if students had seized on the opportunity to write music using the mode in a quasi-Modernist style, without really taking into account the given stimulus or the occasion.

## **Free Compositions**

As has been the case consistently in this specification, free compositions demonstrated the sheer breadth of influences and musical inspiration that students have experienced. The range of genres, sub-genres and styles continues to grow and reflect a very diverse and interesting set of interests.

With free compositions, students are effectively creating their own question. It is important to emphasise that, whilst inspiration may come from anywhere, the nature of the project and its scope should be chosen carefully to best enable the student's talents to be fully demonstrated at the advanced level required in the specification.

What this means in practice is to follow a genre in which the student feels comfortable, but with which a certain level of complexity and creativity can be written into the piece. Having one eye on the published mark scheme can be useful here, but the bottom line is that the music submitted should not be in a style that is overly restrictive (and therefore precluding access to the upper bands for ideas, contrast, development, structure and musical elements) nor overly ambitious (meaning that a successful style is too hard to inhabit or that technical control will suffer). Examples of submissions which are overly restrictive include:

- Songs based on a simple verse-chorus structure, based on the same short chord progression
- 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. These rarely satisfy structurally and offer little opportunity to develop musical ideas; these are two important aspects scrutinised against the mark scheme. Examiners are still seeing a lot of this kind of piece.

Aspects of submissions which set an improbable challenge include:

- Writing effectively for large orchestra (though naturally some can, and do)
- Writing effective virtuosic writing, particularly for piano (examiners heard numerous pieces that would have sounded impressive when played back in software but were impossible to play in real life)
- Writing in an advanced harmonic idiom or complex time signatures.

Despite all of this, there is a sense that students played more to their strengths this year and have put some real thought into how their projects might be realised.

Some students tried to be helpful in supplying video files with music embedded for compositions that had been composed to picture, but **video files are not accepted**. This means that any composition produced should be written to be scrutinised from the audio and supporting documentation (score or aural guide) only.

Finally, care should be taken with the setting of texts, particularly with regard to notation and underlay, where a score is used. It’s also important that, if working in a foreign language, students understand where stressed and unstressed syllables are within words and respond accordingly. Examiners found some notable examples of otherwise good work being let down by an incomplete understanding of language, which is a pity.

## Administration

This was the first year that the new Digital Media Portal was used for submissions. Most centres were adept at submitting their NEA work via this portal but the following is a handy guide for the formats that various types of documentation should be uploaded in for future series:

Candidate Record Forms (CRFs)	<b>Word or PDF document</b>
Scores Aural guides Programme notes	<b>PDF</b> (please use one single PDF for chorales, on multiple pages as necessary)
Audio recordings	<b>mp3, wav or aiff</b>

Please also note that video submissions are **not accepted**. Some students tried to be helpful in supplying video files with music embedded for compositions that had been composed to picture, but these cannot be considered.

## Notated Scores/Aural Guides/Programme Notes

All compositions are required to be supported by some form of documentation of the composer's intentions, whether that is an aural guide, a lead sheet or a notated score. Moreover, the mark scheme has a section devoted to this documentation, with a range of descriptors that goes from "Music is communicated fluently on paper with a comprehensive score or commanding aural guide" to "The written material in no way enhances the composition and is likely to be poor in its detail and layout".

Examiners felt that the overall level of score editing, where this was the chosen means of communicating music on paper, was a little lower than in previous series. This may be partly due to the growing importance of free online software that lacks finesse in score presentation, but there was also plenty of evidence to suggest that this aspect of the submission sometimes lacked due attention and detail. Elements such as dynamics, phrasing, slurs and articulation not only enhance the look of the score, they are integral elements of composition itself and, at advanced level, their use consistently is expected for higher marks.

A printed full score is **not always the most appropriate submission for the work** and, where students are working in a sequencer, it's worth pointing out that the process of turning the sequencer data into a highly polished full score is time consuming and complex. Issues that persist from previous series include:

- Overly complex rhythmic notation arising from unquantized MIDI data
- Incorrect spelling of accidentals
- Incorrect or absent key signatures
- Incorrectly labelled or unlabelled sound sources
- Inappropriate clef choices, or sticking with a given clef where changing partway through might be more prudent
- Music notated in the wrong octave (as a result of other MIDI transpositions or transformations not transferring accurately to the score)
- Audio parts that had been recorded into the software not being notated at all, including vocal parts, important rhythm guitar lines and instrumental solos
- Poor underlay of text in vocal lines.

However, it is also true that the quality of aural guides, and the decision to use these in place of scores for certain styles of composition, has improved significantly since 2018 and this is a great credit to centres and students alike. The best aural guides take stock of key compositional decisions and clarify intentions, with a clear structure outlined through timings on the track. A number of students are still giving bar numbers, and these are incredibly difficult to follow.

## Recordings

The quality of recording continues to improve, whether it is the willingness of students to supply live vocals, an improvement in the quality of sampler instruments or sound sources, or greater care with producing the finished audio. Examiners are always pleased to hear live performances of music for the forces written, though this does not confer an advantage in terms of marks and a software realisation is always acceptable.

One thing that was noticed this year was that some recordings had been produced but not listened to after exporting. Examiners heard the following features which should be avoided wherever possible:

- Metronomes left on during recording (a particular feature of GarageBand)

- Notes “sticking” (MIDI note off commands missing due to hanging ties or some other error)
- Poor balance between parts
- Parts not sounding within the arrangement due to being muted before export
- Recordings ending before the end of the composition

It is also fair to say that, especially in some genres, there are things that are found in scores that do not relate to what is heard and vice versa. It is important that the gap between score and recording is narrowed as much as possible. In most cases, the given supporting material (score or aural guide) is the deciding factor. It is also important that the role of performers in the final performance where elements of improvisation or comping are provided that aren't covered in the supporting material cannot be counted as the student's work.

### **Final thoughts**

Students and centres alike should be congratulated on the hard work that has gone into submissions this year. There has been an impressive and diverse range of compositions.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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