
GCSE MUSIC

8271/C: Non-Exam Assessment
Report on the Examination

8271/C
June 2023

Version: 1.0

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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 COVID-19 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.

This year's GCSE cohort experienced the first COVID-19 lockdown during year 8 and their ability to make music together at school was heavily restricted until year 10. From the feedback received from centres this year, the impact of this disruption has led to students having less confidence in their work, especially in the completion of their GCSE Music coursework. There was further evidence of this found during the moderation of student compositions.

The requirements for June 2023

In the last few years there has been a reduction in the amount students had to compose. For summer 2023, students had to submit two compositions. One based on a choice of given briefs and the other a free choice of their own. The two compositions had to have a combined minimum time of three minutes. This was a return to the full pre-pandemic requirement.

Some students worked specifically to the minimum time and many compositions were exactly 90 seconds in duration. In most of these cases the music stopped, rather than coming to a purposeful end. There was also a significant amount of repetition in compositions this summer.

Free and brief compositions

A very high proportion of students selected brief 2, to 'compose a piece of music suitable for an underwater world documentary'. The film clip provided gave students a visual stimulus for their response. There were some wonderful compositions, clearly inspired by the BBC David Attenborough documentaries, from which students had ideas to create their own narrative. There were many examples of music to portray conflict and resolve in different scenarios. A few students misinterpreted this and composed a cue to be synchronised to the images, however, most used it as the intended starting point for their imagination, and creation and development of ideas.

Most students met the requirement of specifying a suggested audience or occasion for their free composition, but the helpfulness of these was mixed. Some responses were vague, such as 'to be enjoyed by students', which made it difficult to assess if the music was appropriate for its intended purpose.

Both brief and free compositions were composed in a range of styles. In a few cases, there was evidence that students in the same centre had all followed a given template, presenting music with the same structure, and using the same modulations at the same time. Centres are discouraged from this approach as it inhibits students' creativity and could ultimately have a negative impact on their mark. To be able to see the evidence of each student's understanding clearly, it is imperative for them each to choose every aspect of their composition from start to finish, including the purpose and style of the music.

Coursework receiving the top mark 36/36 was achieved by composers using a wide variety of instruments, styles, and genres, including, but not limited to:

- Piano solo
- Song
- Orchestral
- Jazz
- Organ solo
- EDM
- Music for Contemporary Dance
- Film Music
- Choral Music
- Violin Concerto
- Fusion

The Programme Note

For each composition, students must submit:

- An audio recording, to demonstrate how the music should sound when performed or played using technology
- A score, to present their 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 needed to assess the level of a student's understanding and application of music through composition. To understand the context of the importance of these, it might be helpful for students to imagine they each have a few minutes to demonstrate their finished work to an examiner. What they might say in that conversation is what they have written in their programme note. There was a wide range of programme note responses this year. A few students did not meet the requirement to include a programme note at all. Others wrote a detailed analysis into the thousands of words. To gauge if a programme note is of a helpful length and content, students might like to read out their writing to their teacher before submitting it. The '150-words' should be used as a guide.

The Score

Students can choose to present their score as:

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

Students should choose the method that will help them to demonstrate their intentions most clearly. If a student has composed using a DAW (like Logic Pro, Cubase, Soundtrap, BandLab), it is usually most appropriate to present their work as an annotated screenshot. This would come under the category of 'aural guide' on the Candidate Record Form.

The clearest annotated scores this summer had an overview on the first page, with written notes on or around the image to show the structural sections of the piece. Then other screenshots to demonstrate specific features in the music. While the use of pre-recorded loops is not permitted, students should be actively encouraged to create their own loops if they are working in a style

where this is common practice. It is then vitally important that they use the annotated score document to demonstrate the tools and methods they have used to create their 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 this summer:

- Rhythmic devices
- Harmony
- Cadences
- Phrases and melodic structure
- Melodic shape
- Tonality
- Instrumental pitch range
- Dynamics
- Melodic and rhythmic development
- Structure and form

The mostly frequent errors related to harmonic incoherence.

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 and there was evidence the marking bands were not always understood.

About a fifth of centres were marked significantly out of tolerance, where marks two bands too high had been awarded. The most common misunderstanding was in relation to the 18-16 band. Music in this band must have consistently excellent technical and expressive control throughout, and the music should demonstrate a sophisticated level of understanding. Moderators frequently found marks had been awarded in this top band, where some parts of the music were simplistic or incoherent. To achieve marks in the 18-16 (top band), students should have the musical awareness to critically listen to their work and to adjust as needed.

In early 2023, we published [moderation guidance](#) to provide further support for teachers and students. It explains what happens to the coursework when the samples are sent to the moderators in May each year as well as giving further help in understanding the marking bands. The first port of call for any teacher with a question or requiring support is their NEA Advisor. In addition, teachers should look out for the Curriculum Connect online meetings, which are free to attend. The next Curriculum Connect meeting will be in November 2023. To provide further support around the assessment of work, the Teacher Online Standardisation (TOLS) materials are available in the Centre Services area of the AQA website, including examples of a range of styles of composition that have achieved the top mark.

Administration

A major change for this series was the opportunity to send the whole sample, including all the paperwork, on one non-encrypted USB. Most centres chose this method which has significantly reduced the impact on the environment.

In this return to the full coursework requirement, there were many errors and moderation itself was delayed. The main causes were:

- Centres did not include a Centre Declaration Sheet (CDS), or the sheet was not completed and signed by the teacher(s)
- Audio, scores or Candidate Record Forms were 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
- There were unopenable music and graphics software files. Ideally all audio files should be sent as mp3s, as they are universally playable on all devices, and all scores and CRFs should be sent as PDFs
- Samples were not sent on or before the deadline date. In some cases, samples were posted several weeks after the deadline, which significantly delayed moderation

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

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 2023, 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.