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# GCSE MUSIC

8271/W Understanding music  
Report on the Examination

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8271/W  
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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. Students 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, students 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.

## Section A: Questions 01 – 08

This section had questions assessing the recognition of:

articulation dynamics, 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:

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

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

It is worth noting in the ‘features’ questions students can gain credit by answering correctly from only one musical element, or across the elements.

For example, in 04.2

- Identify two features of rhythm, sonority (timbre) and/or tempo used in this excerpt typical of the Minimalist music of John Adams, Steve Reich and Terry Riley.

Students could provide three rhythm (or sonority (timbre)) responses, or two rhythm (or sonority (timbre)) responses and one other or one each from rhythm, (sonority (timbre) and tempo.

Students and teachers are reminded that the phrase ‘*used in this excerpt*’ is paramount, 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 *Vivanne Sets up Shop* by Rachel Portman and Excerpt B was *No One is Alone* from *Into the Woods*.

The questions on rhythmic feature and time signature were well answered here. However, the question on naming the interval was not particularly answered, although there was a noticeable lack of students alluding ‘qualification’ of the interval, such as ‘minor’ 3<sup>rd</sup>. Centres are reminded that only the word/number is needed in these types of questions. Interestingly, the question on tonality was only correctly answered by around a third of students.

Excerpt B proved a high-scoring excerpt, with most students correctly identifying the cello and scoring at least one mark or more on the features question. Recognising articulation types seemed problematic on the paper this year, as was demonstrated in the low level of correct responses in 01.7.

## Question 02

Question 02 featured a piece of piano music by Schumann *Melodie* and Brahms's *Denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt* from his Requiem.

Questions on the Schumann were well answered here, with more than half of students getting two or marks out of three in the features question.

The Brahms was answered well overall, but there were problems for some students identifying an Italian term to describe the tempo in 02.6.

## Question 03

Question 3 saw music from the traditional music area of study (AoS 3). Excerpt A was *Kilimanjaro* by *The Shaolin Afronauts*.

Excerpt A was well answered, with a pleasing number of students being able to identify the 'palm-muted' guitar in 03.2.

Most of Excerpt B was answered well, with most students able to pick out two accompanying instruments and gain some marks across the 'harmony' and 'tempo' features asked for. Far less secure, was students being able to identify the 6/8 time signature. Indeed, only a low number of correct answers were given for 03.5.

## Question 04

Question 4 focussed on music of the Western classical tradition since 1910 (AoS 4), beginning with an excerpt of part of *Steve Reich's Octet*.

Many students found this to be a straightforward question, with a high number of correct responses. It was pleasing to note that an increasing number of students 'mixed' their answers across the elements. Some students gained full marks by listing either three 'rhythm' features or indeed three sonority (timbre) features.

Excerpt B was the taken from *Kodály's Dances of Marosszék*.

The sonority (timbre) questions were answered well here, but the ongoing weakness in identifying harmonic features (and to a lesser extent) tempo are still apparent.

## Question 05

Excerpt A featured an excerpt from *Celeste's Stop this Flame*.

This question was answered well, with most students getting the multiple-choice question correct. Indeed, all questions apart from identifying the 'playing technique in the strings' were well answered.

Excerpt B turned to the gaming music the *Pokemon Red & Blue Theme*.

There were a range of correct answers for this question, and this was strongly answered by students, with many perceptive and detailed answers, showing excellent knowledge of the genre. Some vague answers continue to be given like 'drums' and 'digital'. These were not allowed.

### **Question 06**

Question 06 included the dictation question, which was focussed on an excerpt taken from *Haydn's Symphony No. 53 in D major*.

Students were required to add in four notes at their correct pitches, using the rhythm provided. In previous years this type of question has been problematic for students, but on a positive note this year, over 60% gained one or more mark and nearly 40% gained two or more marks.

Most students were at least reasonably accurate with their attempts to draw four notes on a music stave.

Handel's *Messiah* was the second excerpt choice here with mixed responses. Not many students identified the arpeggio/triadic melodic movement at the start of the music and fewer identified the triplets. Nevertheless, most students identified the harpsichord, and the metre and texture features.

### **Question 07**

Contemporary Latin music was the focus for 07.1, 07.2 and 07.3 and the chosen excerpt was *Agoya by The Souljazz Orchestra*.

This excerpt was reasonably well answered, although a lot of students were unable to recognise the saxophones and the minor tonality of the music. However, a pleasing number of students correctly identified the form of the melody.

Excerpt B was an excerpt from *When the Levee Breaks* by *Memphis Minnie*.

This question proved more problematic for students this year, with insecurity across all features asked about. Notably many students were unable to identify the structure of the excerpt as '12 bar Blues'. The multiple-choice question 07.7 tested whether students were able to identify the bpm of a piece. This was challenging for students this year.

### **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 Matinées musicales*.

Apart from the ornament question 08.3, these questions were answered well, with most students scoring one or more mark on the chords question.

Excerpt B was taken from *Copland's Danzon Cubano*.

08.5 was a question on texture with the correct answer being 'octaves'. This was poorly answered by students, but nearly all students identified the 'pizzicato' playing technique and the dynamic variance in the music. Articulation responses were generally weak, however.

## **Section B: Questions 09 - 12**

Questions in this section are based on the study pieces named in the specification. No excerpts are played, and no scores are allowed into the examination room. There is no requirement for students 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 continue to be *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Paul Simons' Graceland*.

Centres are reminded of the marking guidance for the eight-mark questions found in the mark scheme:

**7-8 marks** A comprehensive response which is consistently coherent and logically structured.

**5-6 marks** A wide-ranging response which is mostly coherent and well structured.

**3-4 marks** A relevant response despite some inaccuracy/omission and weaknesses in terms of coherency and structure

**1-2 marks** A limited response with some significant inaccuracy/omission and a lack of clarity.

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

A significant number of responses failed to focus on the key words in the question. Whilst credit was given for valid points made, a noticeable number of students seemed to write a lot for very little credit. Additionally, there is no need for any introduction, and bullet points may of course be used.

Some students write about everything they know, regardless of the elements asked about. Students are reminded to write about only the elements which are listed in the questions.

*Centres are also reminded that students only have 30 minutes to complete the questions in Section B. This means that they have 15 minutes to spend on each Study piece (the compulsory Mozart and then one other optional piece). Time management is of the essence here.*

### Question 09

Question 9 was based on Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A major in D major, K.622 for AoS 1. 09.1 asked for two features of the Classical period found in this movement. There were many answers available here in this context question, with a good number of students scoring high marks.

09.2 asked for two ways in which the flutes are used in this movement. This question attracted many vague answers, but a good number of students were able to point to the 'solo' and playing in the 'tutti' sections.

09.3 focussed on two ways in which Mozart emphasises cadence points in this movement. The key word in the question here is 'emphasises'. Many students just either identified 'perfect cadences' or named cadence names. More perceptive students answered 'cadential 64', or the added instrumentation or even the clarinet trills.

The elements asked about in the eight-mark question here were about Mozart's use of articulation, melody, texture and/or tonality in the *first episode* of this movement.

Answers here ranged from the comprehensive to the 'scattergun' approach. Some students missed the reference to the 'first episode' and wrote everything they knew about the rondo theme. As alluded to earlier in this report, 'articulation' was not answered well as an element, but 'melody' responses were quite strong. Most students were able to comment on a couple of elements, but there was inconsistency from students naming the key changes in the first episode.

### Question 10

Question 10 focussed on the three songs by *Menken* from *Little Shop of Horrors* 1982 off-Broadway version, beginning with asking about two features of the organ melody.

Question 10.1 was only reasonably well answered, with some students picking up on the sequential movement and four note repeated motif.

Question 10.2 asked students to identify the two missing pitches of a G7 chord. Most students were able to identify the 'D', but after that a variety of responses (sometimes random) were given.

Question 10.3 attracted a wide range and variety of answers for naming two percussion instruments used in the song *Mushnik and Son*. This was a straightforward question for students and attracted a lot of correct responses. A significant number of students also included the 'piano', which of course, is correct.

The elements asked about in the eight-mark question here were harmony, metre, sonority (timbre) and/or structure in the song *Feed Me*.



However, stronger students gained marks on naming keys, identifying types of chords used and listing instruments. Almost all students mentioned the 4 4 (simple time) to 6 8 (12 8) (compound time) change for 'metre'. A pleasing number of students diligently and accurately explained the structure.

### Question 11

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

11.1 was a straightforward question, requiring students to identify two melodic features of the vocal line in the song *Graceland*. This was well answered with the interval in the (melodic) hook a popular answer, as well as the narrow range used.

11.2 asked for two rhythmic features of the instrumental outro of *Graceland*. This was strongly answered by students.

11.3 asked about two features of the bass guitar part in the first verse of the song *You Can Call Me Al*. There was confusion by some students here, with the majority of students confusing this with the bass 'solo'.

Question 11.4 asked students to explain how Paul Simon has used dynamics, rhythm, sonority (timbre) and/or tonality in the song *Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes*.

Overall, this was answered quite well, with most students picking up marks on the rhythmic and sonority (timbre) elements. Many students were able to correctly identify the E major to F major modulation.

### Question 12

Question 12 was based on Kodály's two study pieces specified from Háy János. However, whilst this was the least popular optional study piece chosen, answers were noticeably better, especially in the upper mark band.

For the Summer 2023 paper, the three shorter questions Section B were based upon the *Intermezzo*.

12.1 asked students to name two different transposing instruments. This was a straight-forward question and most students scored well here.

12.2 focussed on two rhythmic features of the cimbalom part. Again, this was strongly answered, with most students identifying the regular, repeated (mainly) semiquaver patterns used.

The 12.3 question asked about two ways in which the horn solo was accompanied. This question was answered least well, and the most popular answers were about dynamic changes and the rhythmic patterns used.

The final question, 12.4, moved the focus to *The Battle and Defeat of Napoleon* and asked for an explanation of how Kodály uses dynamics, rhythm, sonority (timbre) and/or tempo.

This was answered well overall, with some very perceptive responses covering most/all of the elements asked about in the question. Rhythmic patterns were identified, and the tempo changes (including bpm markings) were given by the most perceptive students. At the top of the Level 4 marking band some students were even able to describe the musical effect used by Kodály on the listener in coherent manner.

### **Final comments**

Students should be encouraged to work on the following:

- responses to questions on articulation, harmony, interval recognition and recognition of ornaments.
- correct recognition of tonality.
- using appropriate Italian tempo words.
- confident use of appropriate vocabulary of the particular musical element being asked about.
- ensuring accuracy in responses involving musical notation, namely the dictation question (06.2) and the multiple-choice rhythm question (04.6)
- avoid exceeding the number of 'features' requested in the question.
- avoid writing about elements which do not appear in the extended 8-mark questions.
- producing a clear, coherent structure in the longer 8-mark questions.
- bullet point answers that lacked clear organisation.

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 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.