



General Certificate of Education

MUSIC 1271

MUSC2

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - June series

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MUSC2

Introduction

In its second year, there were clear signs that many candidates approached unit 2 of the new specification with more confidence than their predecessors last year.

The majority of candidates opted for either Brief A or B with slightly more choosing Brief B. Fewer than 10% chose Brief C. It was encouraging to find that more centres had found ways of offering their candidates a choice, managing to deliver the specification such that some could do one brief and others an alternative.

THE SUBMISSIONS

Brief A

There continue to be a few candidates who pick up a pencil and complete this brief on the printed question paper (sometimes only for question 1); the majority present work done on computer, with a clear advantage of guaranteed legibility.

It cannot be over-emphasised how important it is that candidates take the utmost care in transcribing the given material into their computer files: errors are not rare, and can make a significant impact on working the question (for example copying the same bar twice in question 2). It may be worth pointing out a second, related problem: once the question has correctly been copied into the programme, it is vital that no changes are made to the given material. This can easily be done inadvertently, and the thorough candidate will check from time to time that no such slips have been made.

The briefs paper is subject to many stages of scrutiny before it is released. Those who consider that the set melody is somehow wrong – missing an accidental, for instance – can reassure themselves that this is not likely to be the case.

Question 1: Harmonisation of a 16-bar diatonic melody

A very encouraging proportion of candidates showed at least a partial understanding of the compositional techniques required in order to complete this question successfully. In short these are:

- An understanding of the tonal implications of the given melody
- An awareness of where cadences are required and use of appropriate cadential formulae
- An instinct for harmonic direction so that good use is made of primary and secondary triads in appropriate inversions to create convincing progressions
- An appreciation of textures such that each part inhabits a suitable register, the bass provides a strong underpinning and a dynamic partnership with the melody, and the inner parts are free of grammatical errors.

Tonality

The tonal implications of this year's set melody should have encouraged a confident establishment of the tonic key (D major) in the first quarter, and offered opportunity to explore related keys thereafter, both through full modulation and, for those with sufficient imagination, chromatic inflection.

Those who were daring too soon – perhaps trying a cadence in E minor at b.4 – were rarely successful. Conversely those who failed to accomplish either or both of the implicit modulations – to the supertonic minor in b.10 and the dominant in b.12 – were unlikely to achieve a high mark. Many who spotted the cadence in E minor at b.10 failed to realise that this key uses C naturals – important where chords II or IV are used. Most found a way of visiting the subdominant briefly in b.6. Very few found a resourceful solution to b.13-14: to stay in D major, using chord I at b.14³, tends to reduce the impact of the final perfect cadence; a few found that the melodic phrase here can be treated in the relative minor (it is a descending melodic minor scale in B minor) – a much more telling route. Others revisited E minor.

Cadences

Most candidates supplied at least one classic cadential formula. Some successful patterns were used at inappropriate times. For example it is highly unlikely that halfway through (b.8) there would be an interrupted cadence (though it is an option at b.14 for those staying in D major at this point). Some clearly only thought about cadences every 4th bar; others realised that by thinking cadentially in bars 2, 6, 10 and 14 more of the solution could be reached through learned patterns. The opportunity for a perfect cadence in b.2 was taken by some, although those who deployed the dominant 7th in an inner part produced a doubled major 3rd at b.2³. A similar issue surrounded the cadence at b.12.

Bar 6 was often treated as a perfect cadence in G major. Where the chord V was placed on the downbeat in root position this meant treating the melody as the 7th of the chord – a rather awkward harmonic mechanism. A better solution was to write a lesser weight cadence (it is, after all, halfway through the phrase) such as IVb – Vb – I. Others took the opportunity to write a plagal cadence at this point.

Chord choices

Harmonic progressions were not always persuasive. Though less common than last year, unjustified 2nd inversions were still a frequent weakness. Sometimes rather weak chords (e.g. VIb instead of I) were placed at rhythmically strong moments. Elsewhere it was the combination of chords that produced unsatisfying results: V – IV is rarely appealing; chords moving by a 3rd (e.g. II – IV) are also often unconvincing, especially where the 2nd chord is on a strong beat. It is usually best to change bass note either side of a barline: otherwise the rhythmically significant downbeat becomes harmonically insignificant.

Part-writing

Good part-writing remains an elusive goal for some candidates. Among common pitfalls are:

- Parallel 5^{ths} and 8^{ves}
- Lines that leap by an augmented interval, or other challenging intervals such as major 7^{ths}
- Poorly spaced chords, often due to a low tenor part
- Doubled major 3^{rds}
- Unjustified overlapping of parts (e.g. alto above soprano).

Weaker candidates will often include chords that are incomplete (through lacking a 3rd) or are simply dissonant. Stronger candidates find appropriate opportunity for more sophisticated features such as passing notes, suspensions, and diminished 7th chords.

Alternative approach

A small minority of candidates opted to write for an instrumental ensemble. There is scope for this to be done in a manner that creates a different musical character to a choral solution – there is no need for the lower parts to be written with a mind to fitting the (hypothetical) words. However, few candidates have yet produced a really imaginative working that captures this potential. Candidates with experience of playing in an ensemble may like to consider how a brass quartet might discover a more sustained, noble musical character; or a string quartet something more spirited and playful.

Question 2: Controlling Texture

In general this question was less well answered than the harmonisation question. There may be practical reasons for this: perhaps it receives a smaller proportion of time (either out of the 20 hours of controlled time, or possibly out of the available teaching time in advance of tackling the paper).

From the evidence of the candidates' scripts, there are three main areas of weakness:

- Technical errors
- Poor understanding of implications in the given material
- Weak melodic ideas

Technical errors

Technical errors are mainly issues of harmonic fit and part-writing. The given material dictates the harmonic content of the piece, with just the occasional moment that could be interpreted in two ways (e.g. b.12 could be Bb major or G minor). Each note that a candidate writes needs to be either a harmony note of the chord at that moment (i.e. one of the three notes of the triad), or a justified dissonance. Justified dissonances include passing notes and auxiliary notes.

Successful part-writing pays close attention to the combination of the two melodic lines with the given bass line. Consecutive 5^{ths} and 8^{ves} between these three parts should be avoided. Moreover, there should be a convincing harmonic completeness from these three lines alone. Unison between the three might be successful at the start and end; elsewhere, open 8^{ves} and 5^{ths} are usually best avoided.

The choice of instruments is significant (some candidates unwisely left the score unmarked in this regard). Candidates who choose bass register instruments (e.g. cello) must take care not to let the melodic line they write go lower than the given bass of the accompaniment part.

Analysis of given material

Candidates are urged to consider carefully the given material before embarking on a solution. Among the aspects they should consider are:

- What is the implied phrase structure?
- Are there any sequences?

- Are there any common chord progressions (such as circle of 5ths patterns)?
- Are there any modulations to related keys?
- Are there any exceptional features that require careful treatment?

This year's question was ripe with helpful features for those who spent time considering these angles. In b.1-4 the music strongly suggests two 2-bar phrases: in fact bars 3-4 could be treated not just as an answering phrase, but as a sequence of b.1-2. The next four bars are a clear sequence of the opening four bars, now up a tone in G minor. A few recognised that this invited the use not just of F sharps here, but E flats too. (By the same token, a B natural could be used in b.3-4.) A falling sequence follows in b.9-16. There is then a move to the relative minor for b.17-20. Finally the accompaniment clearly presents a hemiola in b.21-22. Strong candidates were able to reflect this in the melodic shapes written in these bars.

There are also some matters of texture that are informed by careful consideration of the given material. Candidates should be aware that a sense of momentum is important here, so where the given material is very static, or even silent, some activity is required in the melodic lines. For example, able candidates created some anacrusic activity in b.20 leading into a new phrase for b.21; similarly some maintained melodic activity – perhaps a kind of arpeggio decoration – in b.23 before reaching a final note on the downbeat of b.24.

Melodic ideas

A significant number of candidates found it challenging to create convincing melodic ideas. Some solutions are weak because they are too bland, but some have insufficient control of melodic material so there is no clear sense of phrase structure or musical character. Improvement could be achieved by considering, separately, those twin aspects: rhythm and contour.

Bland rhythms are heavily dependent on a single note value; this might be very dull (just crotchets) or overly busy (endless semiquavers), but either way no variety of note value gives a rather monochrome effect. On the other hand, a lack of control leads to many different rhythmic ideas all thrown into a rather haphazard mix: semiquavers, dotted patterns, syncopations, ties, triplets, etc. This can be compared to cooking with too many strong, competing flavours.

As a starting point, candidates might rely on a short rhythmic identity comprising two rhythm patterns to create an opening 2-bar phrase: for instance, dotted quaver + semiquaver and two semiquavers plus quaver. (Some candidates appear unaware of how dotted rhythms are created on software packages.) Also remember that phrases tend to end on a longer note value (crotchet in this instance perhaps). Subsequent phrases can have different contours but should keep to the same rhythmic identity. Only when it is time for a contrast (constant change is not contrast: the same things must be done several times before a change will seem like contrast) – perhaps halfway through – should the rhythm be changed. This might call for a new rhythmic pattern (this could be as simple as even quavers) but could be merely a different ordering of what has already been used: perhaps 2 whole bars of the dotted pattern answered by 2 bars of the semiquavers + quaver figure.

This might at first seem too straitjacketed, but it is likely to lead to a degree of success. In time, and with experience, a little more freedom can be deployed perhaps.

Bland contours rely on regular patterns exhaustively. Some candidates, eager to ensure harmonic fit, use only arpeggio shapes. A lack of control leads to unmusical contours that move up or down randomly with all manner of intervals involved in either direction. Few such melodies

are memorable, or singable, and they rarely appear to be created with a sense of phrase structure.

Candidates may like to take notice in which direction their opening melodic shape moves and think carefully how and where to use the contrasting option of the alternative direction. Passing and auxiliary notes can be used to create frequent conjunct motion; within this context leaps or arpeggio figures can be used shrewdly. If a particular leap (a 6th, for instance) is effective as a break to conjunct motion early on, then try to use that interval again subsequently so it becomes a feature of the piece.

Additional aspects to consider

The examiners wish to reiterate that in this question candidates can highlight the musical character of their ideas through appropriate performance directions such as phrasing, bowing, articulation and dynamics. The more these are considered as part of the process of composing the melodies, the more this aspect will not only be convincing, but will be helpful to the candidate in generating the ideas for completing the question.

One aspect that could be used much more productively is considering the tempo of the music. This is not stated on the Briefs paper and many currently let the default setting of the computer software take responsibility for the matter. The candidate who purposefully writes 'Adagio' as a first step is likely to take ownership of the character of the music in such a way as inspires strong musical material. Of course, the fellow candidate who chooses to write 'Vivace' is likely to do equally well, but in a very different way.

Brief B

There was again a very wide range of music submitted for Brief B. It is particularly interesting to see compositions emerging that have absorbed various world music roots, as well as the more usual mix of classical pastiches of various styles, jazz-informed pieces and pop and rock songs.

Compared to the rigour and discipline required in Brief A, at first glance there would appear to be unlimited freedom here to let one's creative flair have full rein. Before embarking on a project, however, candidates should consider the ways in which some factors can – and should – inform the nature of what they attempt. These include:

- The need to write for one of the four stipulated genres
- The required playing time span of 3-6 minutes
- The restriction of 20 hours of controlled time to complete the composition
- The desire to attract the available marks as guided by the specification and published mark scheme

Genres

Four genres are available: keyboard music, small ensemble, vocal music and electronic music. Unlike last year, this year some candidates were drawn to the electronic option.

Successful candidates had clearly studied and considered important aspects of their chosen genre in advance of starting their compositions. This allowed them to go into the first session of controlled time aware of instrumental capabilities (such as finding a pianistic style for writing for the piano), accustomed to the potential for interesting textures, skilled in the setting of text, or fluent in handling the various technological techniques required for electronic music. Those who

were not so prepared were more likely to be drawn into common shortcomings such as not exploring the range of timbre available with their chosen instruments, only writing notes that sit on the staff (i.e. not using leger lines, 8^{va}, or changes of clef), or struggling to find an appropriate rhythm for their chosen text.

There is still a tendency for those writing under the heading 'small ensemble' to believe that interpreting this as being orchestral forces will impress; it is far more likely to make the task much more challenging, revealing various shortcomings or leading to a shortage of time to complete the score.

Duration

The minimum time duration does challenge candidates, and in some cases it is not reached. Where this happens, compositions nearly always lose out on matters of structure, development of ideas and overall extent of their content.

Some candidates seek to meet the challenge by submitting two (or even more) short miniatures. The examiners, in applying the mark scheme, are still looking for good structure and development in these cases. The more unconnected the two movements, the less will the submission meet these criteria. For those who plan a connection between two movements and produce complementary miniatures it can be a good route, however.

Sometimes the minimum duration is reached, but the method relies too much on repetition. Candidates are urged to consider how they might re-use material with a sense of musical re-invention, rather than just by 'cut and paste'. Good options for this include changing the scoring, varying the texture (including register: melody in the bass perhaps), re-harmonising the passage, using a different tonality, and extending the idea, perhaps through treating one of the phrases to sequence.

Controlled Time

With only very few exceptions it would appear that centres have become very adept at handling the requirements for controlled time.

There are some instances of candidates not completing their compositions, or (more often) the ending perhaps being rushed and rather abrupt. It may well be worth suggesting that music does not have to be composed chronologically: there can be real advantages to working out the ending before attempting to write the middle of a piece. This can strengthen the overall sense of structure and reduce the chances that a disproportionate amount of time is used perfecting a particular phrase early on.

Targeting those marks

The AQA specification is significantly broad when it comes to the composing unit, and each year the examiners see a fascinating diversity of creative concepts and musical style from candidates. Nonetheless it is important to recognise that an examination has to have a mark scheme. Those aiming high should be mindful of what aspects gain credit, and not be tempted to pursue their own aesthetic judgment too far without considering the specification and mark scheme.

Shortcomings of compositions that did not achieve high marks include:

- A poor sense of structure, where not only are major sections of contrast not apparent, but there is little sense of phrase structure at a more detailed level.
- A limited harmonic vocabulary. This comes in various guises:
 - Highly repetitive chord sequences
 - Chord choice restricted to diatonic chords
 - All chords used only in root position
 - Unvarying harmonic rhythm (usually one chord per bar)

In pop / rock styles it is usually a good idea if the chorus has not only a different chord sequence to the verse, but a different harmonic rhythm too.

It continues to be surprising how few use the relatively easy-to-use device of a tonic or dominant pedal note.

- A lack of modulation. Sometimes candidates terminate one section of their piece and start the next in a different key, but this is not modulation. Those who show an ability to change key convincingly during the musical flow of a phrase generally create more sophisticated and satisfying results.
- An unimaginative approach to texture. Examiners see a lot of note full, mid-register textures in which all instruments or voices involved tend to have a similar musical character. Ways to improve textures include:
 - Changing register: use leger lines, 8^{va} lines and clef changes
 - Moving the melody from always being at the top of the texture
 - Using plenty of short rests (quaver, semiquaver), especially on the beat
 - Creating a different rhythmic identity for each constituent element of the texture, so the melody, bass line and accompanimental roles within the texture are distinct
- A limited exploration of the range of timbre available from the chosen instruments or voice. This is often true of drum parts, where it is all too easy to rely on a repetitive pattern and not use the available range of different timbres creatively with sections for just metallic sounds, or pedal drum alone. The most effective moments in drum parts are often when they re-enter after a period of silence.
- Weak word-setting, with a very awkward rhythmic pattern that takes little account of the natural stress of the lyrics, and often sets two or more syllables to a single note, or fashions two or more syllables from what is actually a monosyllabic word (e.g. 'wo- - - r - - d')
- Insufficient performance detail on the score, or a deficient annotation that is more a description of the compositional process than a guide to listening to the piece.

Those choosing to compose for the 'Electronic Music' category cannot afford to ignore the information at 3.2 in the specification (p.8) which clearly shows that the composition has to include sufficient pitched material to show understanding of melodic, harmonic and tonal elements. Purely unpitched sound collages will not meet the requirements of the specification.

Brief C

Many of the comments made above in relation to Brief B pertain to Brief C: good structure with elements of contrast, harmonic resourcefulness, imaginative textures, interesting timbres, and well prepared scores with performance detail are all important aspects of successful arrangements.

All these aspects have to be considered in relation to the set melody on the Briefs paper. There were certain similarities in this year's melody to last year's, notably metre and major key, and

there was a similar quality to this year's spread of arrangements. One specific feature this year was the appearance of an accidental in the second half of the melody; this persuaded some to base their entire arrangement on the first half of the melody. In MUSC5 Brief C, which has many bars of given material on which to draw, it is acceptable for candidates to choose only some of the material; but in Unit 2 it is important to arrange the entire melody. Those who dealt with the E flat by omitting the 2nd half of the tune placed themselves at a disadvantage.

Once the first session of controlled time has been used, and the melody for Brief C is therefore known, candidates can make a lot of progress on Brief C away from the controlled time environment. Among things that can be tried, either in improvisation or on paper are: transposing the melody, trying the melody in the opposite mode (i.e. major or minor), finding a way of playing the melody in a different metre, experimenting with the melody in 3^{rds} and / or 6^{ths}, exploring different harmonic options for the tune, and developing a texture with the melody in the bass.

Of course, the results of this preparation cannot be carried into the controlled time sessions electronically or on paper, but remembering attractive material from such experiments can only make the controlled time experience more efficient and ultimately more successful.

Some of the best arrangements seek to treat the given melody in a particular musical style (e.g. waltz, tango, ragtime, etc). This can only be convincingly done where true understanding of the musical elements of the chosen style are really analysed and understood.

Administration

Administration of this unit in 2010 was somewhat more complicated as a result of the decision to have different entry codes for the three briefs. The examiners are very grateful to the vast majority of centres where all the administration was smoothly handled.

The three entry codes have facilitated a more brief-specific approach in all stages of the examining process which it is hoped will have been to the advantage of all candidates.

In future it would be greatly appreciated if, in centres which have entries for more than one brief, the scripts for each brief can be treated to individual CDs. In other words a compilation of Brief A candidates on one CD, a compilation of Brief B candidates on another and so on. This will significantly ease the processing of scripts.

The examiners are particularly appreciative of the time and care taken to produce and process recordings, and it is an especial pleasure when a 'live' acoustic performance is provided: the ideal end product to the composing process.

Final comment

The specification has generated a wider range of work than ever before, and listening to candidates' work in the unit is often a very genuine pleasure. The examiners wish to thank candidates and their teachers for all the hard work that goes into preparing the scripts that are received and wish the next cohort well as they shortly embark on the process.

Mark Range and Award of Grades

Grade Boundaries and Cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA website.