



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

Music

MUSC4

(Specification 2270)

Unit 4: Music in Context

Report on the Examination

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MUSC4 MUSIC IN CONTEXT

General

As in 2010 the unit 4 examination elicited a good range of responses, with candidates achieving a correspondingly varied range of marks.

40% of the marks on this paper come from Section A, a listening test based on unfamiliar excerpts of music; this is followed by essay questions on the chosen set work in Section B (30% of the total marks) and on the chosen Area of Study in Section C (also 30%). The CD of music excerpts lasted approximately 45 minutes after which candidates will have had about 90 minutes to write their two essays.

It is always a pleasure to read some of the responses to the essay questions in sections B and C, which give candidates the opportunity to write with enormous enthusiasm about the music they have studied; this is particularly true for Section C where teachers are able to choose works which they know their students will enjoy.

One particular problem this year was handwriting; there were many cases of writing which was poor, changed character throughout the script, or was almost illegible.

Knowledge of technical terms continues to be a matter of concern; candidates seem keen to use a complex term when a simple explanation would be more appropriate. *Heterophony*, *atonal* and *call and response* were expressions which featured regularly but often inappropriately - the latter might be appropriate to jazz and blues but not to Mahler, Vaughan Williams and Elgar let alone the Tchaikovsky Variations in Section A.

As last year, some candidates found difficulty in time management, writing too much on the Set Work, for instance, and leaving insufficient time for Section C. Teachers are advised of the need to encourage their students to write essays 'against the clock' when preparing for these sections of the examination. It is perfectly permissible to answer the question from Section C first if this enables candidates to write to their strengths, and a significant number of candidates chose to do this.

Section A

The excerpts in this section were not related to the Set Works or drawn from any particular period of musical history. The knowledge likely to be tested is described on page 19 of the Specification, of which the most up-to-date version – Version 2.4 – is on the AQA website. (In the hard copy, Version 2, this is on page 20.) Teachers and students are advised to read this section carefully in order to be familiar with what may be asked.

It is essential that candidates undertake regular practice in listening skills. More marks are available in Section A than for the questions on the Set Work or Area of Study. It is also well worth identifying with candidates the different approaches necessary for each style of question contained in this section.

The marks gained in Section A were often in contrast to those gained in Sections B and C. It was common for candidates with good marks in Section A to score poor marks in B and C or vice versa. Candidates with a good aural sense might only sketchily have studied set works and topics, or those who had worked extremely hard at the essay topics might well have been weaker aurally, which could explain this.

Question 1

There were three short excerpts here: an excerpt from the *Funeral Music for Queen Mary* by Purcell, Hungarian March from *The Damnation of Faust* by Berlioz and *Silent Noon* by Vaughan Williams. These questions were generally well-answered, with many candidates scoring 8 or more marks. A significant number thought that the last chord of the Purcell should be a *Tierce de Picardie* whereas Purcell in fact left out the third altogether. A range of answers was allowed for the percussion instrument in the Berlioz even though *cymbals* was by far the most obvious response. Incorrect spellings were allowed where the meaning was clear.

Question 2 *Alla Marcia* from *Karelia Suite* by Sibelius

Again this was answered fairly successfully by most candidates, although several offered 'fourth' or 'fifth' for the interval between the trumpet parts. Question 2(f) asked how the melody was *treated* when it was played by the full orchestra and responses should have identified the octaves rather than details of dynamics, instruments etc.

Question 3 *When a merry maiden marries* from *The Gondoliers* by Sullivan

As last year a large number of candidates found the style of this question difficult – some failing to gain any marks at all. Identification of chords and cadences and melodic dictation are essential skills which need regular practice. Knowledge of basic harmony can be a huge help – for example the answer to 3(e) was the chord Ic, which as part of a cadential 6/4 progression is among the basic knowledge required at A2. The melody had, simply, modulated to the dominant in bars 9-10, so C or *dominant* and *perfect* were the correct answers for (a). The melodic dictation in 3(b) was an enormous problem for many; there seemed to be very few answers where all five notes were correct, and on many occasions not only were the notes wrong but the actual direction from one note to the next was incorrect.

Question 4 from *Variations on a Rococo Theme* by Tchaikovsky

This question, like question 3, discriminated well. The key to success was commenting on *obvious* features and some candidates did themselves no favours by writing at length but with little relevance to the question. The questions asked about the *melody* and so comments about the accompaniment or the dynamic scheme received no credit. It was somewhat alarming to see the large number of candidates who thought they were listening to a solo violin!

Section B – Set Works

Answers were fairly equally divided between Mahler and Vaughan Williams. **Questions 5 and 7**, which asked for concentration on specific sections of the works, often led to very good answers. The best approach is to go through the movement chronologically and it is also important that equally detailed attention is given to *the whole movement* when this is asked for in the question.

Some of the weaker answers tended to be descriptive, saying what the candidate *saw* on the page, as opposed to what he/she *heard*. It cannot be stressed more strongly that if only the *visual* aspects of the work are noted then the candidate can only achieve up to **half marks** for that answer. The poorer answers on the song setting (Q5) concentrated more on instrumentation or Mahler's interpretation than on the melodic aspects of the vocal line and the harmony that accompanied it, and thus only partially addressed the question.

Once again it was noticeable that many candidates had copied out musical quotations from the score in their answers. Since candidates are allowed to take an unmarked score into the examination, this is an unnecessary and time-consuming exercise. Accurate bar numbers would have been sufficient to identify the location of musical features. Inability to locate musical points exactly became tiresomely familiar, and mention of harmonic ideas was also lacking in several scripts.

It is important to use technical language correctly in this section of the paper, and this is specifically mentioned in the mark scheme. Furthermore, candidates should not refer to the composer simply as 'Williams' - VW would be more acceptable.

Candidates need to be reminded that the kind of response required in the more 'open-ended' **Questions 6 and 8** must be as detailed as in the more specific questions. Whilst there were many very good answers, some candidates tended to come rather unstuck either by going briskly through the whole of the symphony, thus writing at length, or by discussing only one movement. To answer this sort of question thoroughly a better approach would be a detailed investigation of selected short sections - two or three at the most - spread through the whole symphony.

In the Mahler it is simply not sufficient to refer to dynamics, *arco*, *pizzicato*, *col legno* etc and the fact that the wind instruments play with raised bells as examples of Mahler's *individual* way of writing for instruments. The *scordatura* violin in the second movement always featured (sometimes tuned higher, sometimes lower....). It would have been more profitable to have considered tessitura, scoring and other similar matters. The description of various string techniques did not take into account similar practices by Berlioz and even Vivaldi. Candidates can easily fall into this kind of trap.

Similarly in the question on Vaughan Williams the 'old' aspects might have been modality, texture and the treatment of the instruments in groups whilst the 'new' aspects could include key centres and complex chords. Some candidates interpreted 'old' as 18th or 19th Century music, or music already written by the composer, such as Pilgrim's Progress.

Centres used a variety of editions for the set works, but should note that if bar numbers are absent from the score they *may be written in* to enable candidates to locate musical examples accurately.

Section C

Candidates offered a wide range of responses to the questions in this section. Many of them were a pleasure to read, showing work as detailed as that for the Set Work questions. Many candidates added musical quotations; these should add to the understanding of the answer presented but they often gave the impression that candidates were determined to write out whatever quotes they had memorised, whether or not they might be relevant to the question. This section requires candidates to *write in detail about the music they have studied*. The questions in this section will necessarily be open-ended and, no matter how they are phrased, are a means to elicit from candidates a detailed appreciation of some of the music they have experienced whilst giving them a focus for their writing.

Teachers are encouraged to make sure that their candidates understand that this is the case and that there may be different ways of approaching the question. The mark scheme shows this, referring throughout to the quality of responses in terms of candidates' *references to music*, although the marking must obviously reflect how well the essay addresses the question set.

English Choral Music in the 20th Century

Belshazzar's Feast, *Dream of Gerontius* and *War Requiem* were again very popular choices here as were some smaller-scale works by, for instance, Jonathan Harvey, John Tavener and Herbert Howells.

There were some excellent answers to **Question 9**, which produced discussions of one or two pieces from the output of one of the composers listed. The majority of candidates had studied the works in question thoroughly and revealed a detailed knowledge of the music. It was sufficient to write informatively and authoritatively about one piece or part of one piece to illustrate the 'contribution' asked for in the question.

Question 10 also attracted some excellent responses. The question asked for techniques of *choral writing* - different ways of writing for *choir* and not *vocal* writing - so matters such as texture, tessitura and word setting were relevant. There are, of course, some pieces where soloists and chorus are too closely entwined to separate out - but it was important to focus on the choir and not the soloists or the instrumental accompaniment to score the highest marks.

Chamber Music from Mendelssohn to Debussy

Again there were some excellent answers to **Question 11**, which produced typically discussions of the music of two or more composers. Mendelssohn and Debussy were popular and good choices, but there was also work on Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Dvorak. The majority of candidates had studied the music thoroughly and, with few exceptions, revealed a detailed knowledge of the music.

Question 12 was about instrumental writing - the sharing out of melody, different textures, different accompanimental figurations etc. It was probably better not to answer this question by reference to chamber music with piano as the piano tends to dominate the accompaniment. Unfortunately not all candidates understood what was being asked for here and the nub of the question was not therefore properly addressed in many cases, although those who were string players clearly had a better understanding than others.

Four Decades of Jazz and Blues

Musical detail is just as important here as in the other Areas of Study. **Question 13** needed both a historical and a musical perspective. As mentioned last year writing informatively about this musical genre may not seem an easy task as, for the most part, there are few scores to study. Discussion of the structure, the harmonic vocabulary used (naming chords or chord sequences) melodic and rhythmic characteristics and the different forces used, with reference to specific pieces, would have produced a very satisfactory outcome. Too much delving into the background of the musicians, relevant though it might have been to the character of the music played, resulted in less successful responses.

Question 14 asked for a focus on just the musical output of the chosen musician, and again musical details – structure, harmony, melodic and rhythmic characteristics - were vital for a high mark to be awarded. This cannot be stressed strongly enough.

Conclusion

Teachers and students are once again to be congratulated on their careful and detailed preparation and enthusiasm in tackling the wide range of music necessary to do well in this unit.

Mark Range and Award of Grades

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

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