

Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

June 2011

GCE Music
6MU05 Composition and Technical
Studies

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GCE Music 2011

Examiner's report - 6MU05

The standard was largely unchanged, with a small rise in the mean mark to 48.9 from 48.4 in 2010. There was however, some movement in the popularity of the various tasks.

The division between compositions and technical studies was more equal this year, with 49% choosing a composition compared with 36% in 2010. As in 2010, the Bach chorale was overwhelmingly the most popular option although there was a fall in numbers (31% compared with 40% in 2010). The most common combination of tasks in the portfolio was again a composition coupled with a chorale.

Overall, 65% of the candidates achieved better than half marks, 5% more than last year. However, the disparity between the two parts of the unit is still marked.

78% of the compositions achieved better than half marks, compared with 61% of the technical studies, a split broadly consistent with last year's results (83/63). These slight changes in the 2011 figures indicate that a body of weaker candidates moved from the technical studies to a composition brief. Such a shifting of choice left the mean mark for the unit as a whole largely unchanged.

The disparity between the marks for compositions and technical studies was inherited from the last specification, in which the composition units had a higher mean mark than the techniques papers and this has been due in part to the nature of the tasks; composition being coursework and techniques being a timed test. The principal reason however, is an underlying lack of skill in the handling of harmony that is central to the successful completion of the technical studies. Examiners are increasingly lamenting this as a growing trend, not only in the technical studies but also in the compositions. It is no coincidence that the optional harmony criterion in the composition units is the one most frequently avoided by examiners, being the weakest aspect of the student's submission. This weakness is carried through to the other units, for example Unit 6, in which answers to questions about chords, keys and cadences are often the least well done.

The composition briefs

There were few reported problems with the choices of instruments as specified in the briefs for the Area of Study *Exploiting Instruments*. These were designed to create some comparability between the submissions in terms of instrumental resources.

The brief based on ritornello form attracted 13% of the candidates. There was a wide range of responses, the best meeting the implicit demands of development and tonal contrast. However, many candidates relied on copied and pasted structures to create the necessary elements of repetition.

This did not always produce the variety of ideas that would have brought the piece to life and taken it beyond the mere formulaic. Some students stretched the words *based on* a little too far and offered pop songs, on the assumption that the inclusion of a chorus and other repeated sections met the requirements of the brief. To the extent that there was an element of repetition and contrast, this assumption was correct - but it failed to grasp the structural richness inherent in ritornello form and the diversity of approaches that were possible.

The concert study was equal in popularity to Brief 1 and resulted in the highest number of excellent marks. This brief tended to be approached best by confident performers, who wrote convincingly for their own instrument. They adopted the type of ternary form upon which many 19th century studies are based and employed a contrast between bravura and cantabile passages. Many of the less successful pieces fell short because the capabilities and characteristics of the chosen instrument were not fully appreciated and realised. The required *cadenza*-like passage was omitted by some, mainly those who worked with MIDI timbres, using a sequencing package whose rigid track timings made an instrumentally idiomatic and rhythmically free passage too difficult to manage.

The film brief again attracted surprisingly few candidates (9%) given the popularity of this topic in the past. One possible explanation for this is the adoption, in the 2008 specification, of a brief which some may have found too constricting. Nonetheless, there were some excellent submissions, some with a professional polish and a vivid sense of imagery. Many failed to include the summary of scenes that was required.

As with the *Composing Expressively* brief in Unit 1, a common problem is a difficulty in linking the sections together convincingly. There is much that can be learnt here from the film scores in the Anthology, in particular *Passport to Pimlico* which, although a little dated in feel, is seamlessly constructed around a series of images using key changes and cadences to link what would otherwise be a jerky and episodic structure. Similarly, the extract from *Titanic* underscores the ship setting sail, seamlessly cross-cutting from the machinery in the bowels of the ship to the open sea and the characters on deck.

The brief for a composition to accompany an ice dance was chosen by 14% of the candidates – an increase over the 6% who chose the ‘dance’ brief in 2010, doubtless fired by the link with the current television series. There was a very wide range of responses, the best showing an awareness of the skaters, the mood and the setting. Some candidates took this brief as an opportunity to compose an instrumental pop or jazz composition. Whilst this was by no means inappropriate – many ice shows feature popular songs – it did in some cases, suggest a slightly unenterprising approach to the task and a ‘made-to-measure’ feel.

Technical studies

The smallest entry for the technical studies was Baroque counterpoint, which at 8%, showed a marked drop from last year's figure of 14%. Candidates had some difficulty in devising suitable chord structures and the figuring of bars 17-23 created particular challenges. Details, such as the suspensions in bars 7-8 were often mismanaged, although most were able to create a suitably stylistic sense of rhythm. Marks are commonly lost under the *Sense of Line* criterion, under which the melodic flow and contour are assessed. There were, nonetheless, some outstanding submissions which demonstrated well-preparedness for the task.

The Bach chorale was the most popular option in the unit as a whole (31%). Generally, the cadences were managed well, although the choice of chords in the intervening bars was not always fully convincing. The most common errors were inappropriate 6/4 chords and diminished chords in root position. As in the Baroque counterpoint submissions, marks tended to be lost under the *Sense of Line* criterion, particularly where inner parts were angular or dull, or when parts involved awkward leaps, for example an augmented interval. Style was, however, grasped effectively by the stronger candidates who included the ii7b chord correctly at cadences and the tierce de Picardie in bar 10.

The popular song option was chosen by 12% of candidates – an increase over last year (10%). Although there was an improvement in the submissions, many candidates appear to approach this task with only a rudimentary vocabulary of chords. An understanding of the way dissonance works in popular music is essential and a basic knowledge of chords I, IV and V in root position is not sufficient. Another weakness is an inability to connect the given material convincingly to the added material, or to draw upon it for melodic ideas and development.

Administration

As with Unit 2, there were some unsatisfactory scores whose notational errors and/or lack of editorial detail, made the examiner's task difficult. Neat and accurate presentation is particularly important in this unit. Unlike Unit 2, which has the advantage of a sleeve note that can serve to explain some of the features of the composition, there is only a score and CD in Unit 5.

Completion and printing of the technical studies using a computer is becoming more common, but there has been a corresponding increase in the number of errors made whilst transcribing the question. Some candidates then proceed to work the question without apparently discovering these mistakes.

It is important to check CDs before posting them to the examiner – some CDs were blank or contained only data – and to pack them so that they arrive undamaged.

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