



Pearson
Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2019

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music (9MU0)
Paper 02: Composing

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General Introduction

The standard of work submitted for this component was as expected and marks were broadly in line with those of the 2018 cohort. It was again encouraging to see the enthusiasm with which students approached their own briefs for the Free compositions, and that in the Briefs Assessing technique Arrangement and Remix continued to be attempted by nearly a fifth of the students.

Popularity of options

Over three quarters of students chose a completely free composition, a proportion which has risen from 2018, for which they set their own style/genre, audience and occasion. The two most popular options from the Pearson-set briefs continued to be the Instrumental Music and Film Music briefs, which amounted this year to around an eighth of submissions between them, while the other four options made up the remainder. For the Briefs assessing technique the Bach Chorale option was again attempted by the vast majority of students, while the Arrangement and Remix options continued to be attempted by a small but solid base of students. There were a very small number of students who attempted the Two-part counterpoint option.

Composition 1 (Free or to a set brief)

Importance of the Assessment Criteria

A good understanding of the Assessment criteria plays an important part in a successful submission. Students should be encouraged to consult the Assessment criteria at all stages of their composing work, from planning through to final realisation.

Grid 1 Creating and developing musical ideas with coherence.

This grid can earn a maximum of 13/40 of the marks for Composition 1. The majority of the marks for this criteria were in levels 3 or 4 of the assessment criteria. Stronger students' work sometimes reached the top of level four (11/13), but level 5 marks were rare. At the lower end there were marks in level 2 (5/13) and sometimes in level 1. This criteria assesses not only the overall coherence and shape of a piece, and its fluency and variety, but also the shape, organisation and balance of individual sections, and, to some extent the bar to bar coherence of the music in terms of a sense of direction. Higher marks are available to those pieces that manage the balance of unity and variety carefully, whatever the musical structure chosen, and in which a sense of wholeness can be felt. The creation of, and development of, distinctive musical ideas is also key to success in this criteria. Work scoring highly in this criteria included some very strong examples of well-handled Sonata Form, sometimes submitted in response to the Instrumental Music brief, Film music scores where the sections had been skilfully linked, some Pop ballads where traditional popular song forms had been matched with stylish material, and some atonal pieces where the composer had realised that pitch organisation is not the only desirable structural feature. At the lower end of the mark range pieces often employed over-repetition of rather modest material, sometimes employing relentless repetition of one or perhaps two chord sequences, or presented music that lost direction and coherence as the result of an over-abundance

of ideas. At this level, although structures such as Theme and Variation and Ternary Form are certainly usable, some students failed to prevent a predictability stemming from, in the former, the same pattern of chords variation after variation or the same length of section, and in the latter, 'cut and paste' returns of the 'A' section.

The requirement to submit a composition lasting a least four minutes was met by the vast majority of students, with several examples of very successful pieces lasting up to nearly twice that time. However, pieces much beyond eight minutes tended to lose direction and were sometimes unable to maintain the interest of the listener, suggesting that some editing could have been beneficial. There were, again, some students who struggled to sustain their music for the required time, sometimes adding seemingly unrelated material in the form of sections which added nothing more than a few seconds to the overall timing of the piece.

Grid 2 Creating and developing musical ideas with expressive control

This criteria carries 14/40 of the marks and is an opportunity for the student's music to be rewarded for its artistic and emotional impact. Marks of 11/14 were often achieved by the stronger submissions, while weaker work often merited only the top of level two (5/14). This criteria rewards not only the effectiveness of the student's response to the brief but also their ability to use the musical elements to create and sustain moods and atmosphere in the service of the audience and occasion selected for the music. Students attempting the Pearson set briefs had mostly taken careful notice of the detail and were therefore often able to access the higher levels of the mark scheme in their work. In the two most popular set briefs, Instrumental Music and Music for Film, there were examples both of very successful Piano Trios, normally in a Classical or Romantic musical idiom, and of Western Film scores, where the influence of Ennio Morricone was often in evidence, complete with jangling guitars, whistles and bells. Students setting their own brief sometimes made a good attempt at living up to their aims, but there continued to be quite a few examples of very vague briefs indeed ('piece for a school concert') where it was difficult for examiners to find the focus required in the music to allow students to access the higher range of the Assessment Criteria. Some students had submitted a brief synopsis of the ideas behind their Free composition, which was very helpful in the assessment process, while others had simply filled in a vague title on the Composing Authentication Sheet. There were some examples of self-set Film music, for example, where little or no indication of plot/action had been included, either on the score or in a separate document, giving the examiner little evidence to work with in the allocation of a fair mark for this criteria.

Grid 3 Creating and developing musical ideas with Technical control.

This criteria supplies a maximum of 13/40 of the marks for Composition 1. Stronger submissions here often gained marks in the middle of level 4 (10/13) while weaker efforts typically earned marks at the top of level 2 (5/13). This criteria covers the organisation of pitch, texture, tonality, sonority, tempo, rhythm and metre, dynamics, as well as use of stylistic conventions, instrumentation and control of texture. With so many features to be considered here the marks given for this criteria once again reflected a careful balance of positive and negative features, with examiners weighing for example the relative merits of good use of instruments and textures

against weaker melodic shape or poor rhythmic flow. Most students seemed to be relatively adept at selecting and using their chosen forces (although the common problems remained – instruments placed in weak registers, cluttered textures, low tessitura chords in Piano left hand) and sometimes were also comfortable in using conventions of the musical style they had chosen. The weaker areas remained, all too often, melodic shape, rhythmic flow and harmonic variety – the most basic of the musical elements, but surely the most important for students to develop from the earliest opportunity. While many students performing for the Performing unit (9MU0/01) will have been learning an instrument or voice for a number of years, it is probable that their composing careers have begun in earnest only at the beginning of GCSE, and are therefore behind in their development in these areas. Just as a solid performing technique is based on practice and rehearsal it is to be hoped that the compositions submitted for this component will be the end point of a process involving the development and practice of compositional technique developed through research, exercise and useful feedback from teachers.

Free compositions.

The majority of compositions were to briefs provided by the students themselves. Strong submissions were quite common and were often related to or modelled on one of the current set briefs or one from a previous year. Students often chose genres or styles with which they were familiar as a performer, or perhaps ones related to the set works in 9MU0/03, where their deeper knowledge of the working of the music paid dividends in the design and delivery of a more detailed and polished end product in their own composition. Where the students' own briefs were rather vague the music tended to follow suit, often lacking focus and direction. Similarly, while many pieces began well with a focused opening idea, not all managed to sustain the level of invention to another, or indeed to develop and extend the original idea to its potential. In this respect harmonic weaknesses often limited the success of even quite good melodic ideas, with over-repetition of chord sequences, limited variety of chords and progressions and lack of tonal range being the main shortcomings in this area. There were some highly successful submissions in all genres and styles, with full marks awarded for pieces which were outstanding in their maturity, assurance and imagination from composers still so early in their development.

Set brief compositions

Brief 1 -Vocal Music

This option was attempted by few students, probably because of the requirement for a Recitative and Aria. However, there were a few very successful submissions here, including those in a Handelian or Mozartian style, as well as some in a Music Theatre style which successfully transformed the Operatic recitative into a parlando introductory section to a conventional show song.

Brief 2 – Instrumental Music

This was the second most popular option among the set briefs. The task here was two-fold: to create and articulate a successful Sonata Form movement and to create a viable Piano Trio for performance at a Chamber

Music festival. Predictably, the better students fulfilled both objectives, some only one, and the poorer ones, neither. The most common shortcomings were poor contrasts and links between first and second subject material, meandering development sections and overly-verbatim recapitulation sections with little or nothing to add to the material of the exposition. Similarly, despite some excellent writing for Piano, Violin and Cello in stronger submissions, there were examples of poor instrumental writing, most often in the Piano part.

Brief 3 – Film Music

Although not as popular as the 'Spy thriller' brief in 2018, this was still the most popular of the set briefs, with much good work in evidence here. Much research had obviously been done here by the stronger students and their work showed a good command not only of the general style musical types found in Westerns, but also of the details of instrumentation, melodic style and pacing, using a variety of musical devices to effect a change of scene/mood. Less successful pieces often contained insufficient contrast, perhaps lacked focus, or simply did not flow: although sections can end definitely in Film Music, too many 'stops' do destroy continuity and make the piece sound like a medley of unconnected ideas.

Brief 4 – Popular Music and Jazz

This was attempted by only a small number of students - perhaps because Heavy rock is a more niche interest at present. Having said this, there were some good submissions for this brief, often combining a good working knowledge of guitar and drum based rock with a snappy structure and good forward momentum in rhythm. Many students did choose to submit a pop song as a free composition, where some did very well indeed.

Brief 5 – Fusions

This was a challenging brief which was attempted by few candidates and typically produced rather polarised results. There were some very focused and well-researched pieces which combined the subtlety and detail of Latin-American rhythm with the tunefulness and élan of the Viennese Waltz, but these were balanced by rather vague efforts where neither style seemed to be understood or indeed clearly represented in the music.

Brief 6 – New Directions

This attracted a small proportion of students, and was generally well attempted, with some excellent submissions approaching atonality from different angles. Serial methods were often employed, although sometimes the organisation of pitch seemed to be seen as a substitute for any other organising principles in the music, while in non-serially atonal pieces there was often more of a chromatic feel. Some students helpfully provided astronomical images to accompany their music, and the best efforts here combined imaginative textures and moods with workable musical structures.

Composition 2

Briefs assessing technique

In this part of the component students could choose to spend their six hours working on a 'traditional' technical composition -Bach Chorales or Two-part counterpoint- or on an Arrangement or a Remix. Despite the wide range of styles here, three quarters of the marks came from three common assessment grids, with the fourth being individual to each option. The total mark here was out of 20, meaning that this component contributes a third

of the marks in this component. In addition to the published Assessment criteria for these briefs, students and centres are encouraged to consult the document 'Guidance Notes on Briefs Assessing Technique', available on the Pearson A level Music website.

Bach Chorales

This was by far the most popular option, being attempted by over three-quarters of students. The two Chorales set contained a selection of common melodic shapes found in J.S.Bach's Chorale output and students will have encountered many of them in their preparations for this paper. On the whole examiners were pleased with the responses to this brief in 2019. Although still showing a very wide range of marks (from 5 to 20) it was felt that the overall standard had improved slightly on 2018, possibly as teachers had begun to take on the consequences of the assessment criteria. What follows are some notes on the specific qualities of this year's Chorales.

In Chorale 1, a large number of candidates began with a bass line running in quavers from B flat up to F on the 3rd beat of the first bar. This created parallel 5ths between the soprano and bass between beats 2 and 3. In bar 2, a very large number of candidates chose a chord of B flat on the 2nd beat, presumably regarding the E flat in the soprano as an accented auxiliary note. This is a most unlikely solution and in any case is an undesirable choice given that B flat may have been used three times already in the first five beats. The return to chords recently used was a feature of many attempts, often with B flat major in root position used on the first beat of four of the first five bars. Candidates should bear in mind the need to consider all the possible options at each stage of the harmonising process. Many students continue to struggle with the cadence pattern in the soprano in bar 4 beat 3 to bar 5 beat 1 (similarly in Chorale 2 at bar 4 to bar 5). The widely-used ii7b-V-I is not possible here without creating parallel 5ths between soprano and bass. The solution is either to reach the dominant chord on the third beat of bar 4 - but with a 4-3 suspension - or to harmonise each of the quavers on the third beat separately, e.g. iib-Ib or iib-vi. However, it was pleasing to see in many scripts successful use of ii7b-V-I at other suitable points, e.g. bars 6-7 and 15-16 in C1 and 7-8 and bar 10 in C2. Many students have learned to take the Leading Note down to the fifth or up to the third of the tonic chord at a cadence but seem to forget that when doing this Bach almost always precedes the LN by its tonic. The relatively low Soprano 'F' end to the phrase at bar 7 quite often led to an overlap in the next chord, where the Alto leapt to a 'G'. Later in the same phrase many students were tempted into a Ic -V progression at bar 8 3-4, but Ic is not correct here, as the fourth (G) can not be prepared as it is in the given part. There were many avoidable parallels caused by students not having checked the link into or back out of the given material given between bars 9 and 11: a B flat root position chord was not possible at 11.3 because of the parallel 8ves

between S and B. More generally, there were many part-writing errors that seemed not to have been checked from the last chord of one phrase to the first of the next, and it might be worth a reminder that parallel 5ths arrived at by contrary motion are also regarded as undesirable. The phrase from bar 11.3 to 14.1 was longer than others, and some students struggled to achieve both a variety of chords and to make clear the change of key towards C minor. Far too many examples ignored the modulation altogether until the last two or three chords, or else merely oscillated between tonic and dominant chords in C minor for all of bar 13 towards the cadence, when what was needed was other harmony (perhaps an F minor chord or a *tritone*) to allow the ear to settle into the new tonality smoothly. The weakest submissions treated the minim at 13.3 (and others in the brief) as one chord only. There were opportunities for suspensions in the last phrase of this Chorale which many students embraced.

Chorale 2 presented a few different problems due to its minor tonality, the most common error encountered probably being the inclusion of augmented 2nds when approaching the leading note (although some students avoided this by not sharpening the leading note at all). In bar 3.3, G major was an unlikely chord choice because of the false relation that arises from the preceding B major chord unless the D natural is in the tenor. Similarly, students who had cadenced appropriately on E minor at 5.3 needed to avoid a G major root position chord at 4.1, as it created octaves. The fourth phrase of this Chorale was harmonized either in A minor, (in which case F naturals needed to appear in the approaching harmony) or as an Imperfect cadence in G major. The phrase beginning at bar 11 contained two leaps in the Soprano, which often led to exposed fifths or octaves: Vb-I in C major is not appropriate from 11.3 to 11.4. The last two phrases of this Chorale were quite straightforward and there were a high proportion of Tierce de Picardie endings to this Chorale.

Although chord and key choice is vital in this brief, the inclusion of stylistic features is also credited with the same number of potential marks and so should not be ignored. Many students had attempted to treat the leading note appropriately at cadences, and most had made some effort to include at least some quaver movement. However, this, as in 2018, had resulted all too often in unwanted part-writing errors which negated the decorative effect. Similarly, the over-use of auxiliary notes also did little to enhance the feeling of polyphony aimed for in their inclusion. Sadly, only the strongest students were able to successfully incorporate both suspensions and chromaticisms into their Chorales this year.

Part-writing remains a weak area for many students, the most disheartening possibly being the large number of parallels in some students' work between Bass and Soprano, which not only indicates poor part-writing, but also a poor choice of harmony. Overlaps, doubling of the leading note, part-crossing and poor dissonance treatment were also

common problems here, as well as the tendency to create exposed 5ths and octaves when the Soprano part leaps. Some weaker submissions omitted the third of the chord and one or two even saw fit to change the given Soprano line.

Many students obviously understood the importance of a flowing Bass line, with some contrary motion in relation to the Soprano, and there were also some flowing and 'singable' Alto and Tenor lines. Weaker Bass lines often lacked shape, moving either by small intervals rather shapelessly, or with larger leaps, creating an angular feel. Inner parts occasionally contained rather static or 'oscillating' shapes, while in the minor key chorale, there were many examples of rising augmented seconds or fourths.

Two –part counterpoint

There were again very few attempts at this option with most marks bunched into the mid-range. The stronger students showed a good sense of harmonic and tonal movement, allied with stylish melodic lines which had shape and direction. Some weaker students showed little regard for the relationship between the two parts – the basic rules of part-writing apply here, as well as in Bach Chorales. Students are reminded that there is nothing wrong in using some of the given material within their answer: indeed, it is positively encouraged, and also creates a sense of musical unity within the piece. It would be encouraging to see a rise in the number of students attempting this option in future years.

Arrangement

This option was the second most popular of the four BAT options, attracting around a tenth of students, which was a little reduced from 2018. The vocal and modal nature of the stimulus this year may have put off some students, but this was still an encouraging take-up and there were some very good responses to the brief. Instead of specifying a number of instruments voices to be used, the brief required a 'four-part texture', to include at least one voice. There were a number of different interpretations of what constituted a four-part texture, from single voice + piano arrangements to those in which many more than four parts (instrumental or vocal) were present. Although most submissions did fall within this remit, there were a few that used up to eight instruments which lost credit through having exceeded the prescribed forces. The modal nature of the stimulus melody did cause some students to produce rather bland, directionless harmonisations, (although their study of Vaughan Williams' 'Wenlock Edge' for 9MU0/03 might have provided a model for successful harmonisations of such melodies): stronger students either embraced these modal aspects or produced more colourful harmonisations. One or two submissions moved the stimulus into the major key, with varying degrees of success. Structurally, many students simply wrote a strophic setting, possibly with an instrumental section separating the verses, and also sometimes with an introduction and closing coda. There were many rather unfocused instrumental obbligati, often played simultaneously with the stimulus, which did little to enhance the effect. Similarly, some of the added material, either to set the second verse of lyrics, or as contrasting material to the stimulus, was either insufficiently contrasting, or had little real character of its own. There were fewer attempts at re-aligning the style of the stimulus than in 2018, with most

students adopting an all-purpose 'folk' style to address the audience and occasion. There were attempts to move the geographical 'feel' of the original: to China, the USA or even back to Scotland, complete with Bagpipe obbligato. Some of the more successful students here had written acappella arrangements, responding to the textural and harmonic challenges well, and seeming very at home with exclusively vocal groupings.

Remix

Taken up by around 5% of students, there were many strong submissions for this option, with many students, as in 2018, showing considerable skills in the use of music technology.

This year's stimulus was in a modal E minor, which made it very suitable for use in a Dance Music setting. Many students created a viable accompanying chord sequence with some chord changes, but too many produced either a very static set of chords, or perhaps one which seemed to bear very little relation to the stimulus it was meant to accompany. There were examples of carefully created countermelodies, used in counterpoint to the stimulus, but too often another riff was simply overlaid with little regard for the cumulative effect. Rhythmic styles were generally reasonably successful, although getting variety into a drum pattern is more difficult than it seems, and was beyond some students here.

A strong sense of style was often present in stronger submissions here, as was a suitable structure, whether or not it included the seemingly compulsory breakdown section. Dance music works by raising and lowering the excitement levels of its audience, and this factor needs to be built into the structuring of this option. Some weaker students struggled to establish a style here while others found any kind of balance between unity and variety very difficult to achieve, often producing over-repetitive results. The use of music technology was central to this task, and many students had used technology not only to produce a clear, balanced recording, but also as a creative tool to enhance the end product. In this respect there were many skilled uses of effects, signal processing and digital editing, as well as much creativity in the choice of appropriate timbres, synthesised, sampled and occasionally live. Weaker students sometimes tried conceal a lack of content behind over-use of effects in particular, but these efforts were often self-defeating.

The sample this year was a male voice, in a slightly more 'rocky' style to 2018's female pop song. The best submissions often transformed the given vocal sample radically, re-ordering and editing it, transposing, playing it against itself, and changing it in many other ways. Many students used the 'Push it to the limit' chant at the end of the stimulus as the basis for an introduction, and a few even transformed parts of the original so much as to make it almost unrecognisable (in a good, musical way!). Weaker submissions sometimes left the original sample virtually unaltered, or perhaps failed to synchronise it with the added accompaniment. Students are required by the brief to use the whole stimulus at least once, and there were a few examples of submissions where this had not been done with marks lost accordingly.

Once again, examiners were pleased at the overall standard of attempts at this option, and at the variety and musicality shown.

Underlength submissions

Following a decision by Ofqual in March 2019, exam boards were permitted to make their own decisions on any penalty for underlength submissions. Pearson adopted a system of scaled reductions of the overall mark on a sliding scale where the total length of the submission did not reach the required 6 minutes. Although there were probably a similar number of such submissions as in 2018, nearly all of these were now subject to only a small reduction of marks, depending on how far under 6 minutes the submission was. Examiners were far happier to apply this much more nuanced system of penalties, and this process was also applied to the very few compositions where composition 1 did not reach the required 4 minutes, but where the whole submission still lasted 6 minutes. The process was still monitored and checked by Team Leaders and the Principal examiner for accuracy of timings, and centres are reminded that the timings must be accurately recorded, and that the 'allowance' for Chorales and 2-parts is fixed each year and can not be altered.

There were still a few examples where students had left significant sections of either the Chorale or Two-part counterpoint options incomplete. In such cases examiners were instructed to mark as if the missing sections were incorrect, often leading to marks in the lowest two levels of the assessment grids.

Administration

Most of the submissions arrived at the examiners on time, with the correct accompanying paperwork, scores and recordings. However, there remained a minority of problems, which although nearly all easily fixed, nonetheless took time in the context of quite a short marking window for the examiners. CAS forms were sometimes left unsigned by either Teacher or student (or both); scores were sometimes submitted electronically, or not at all. In other cases the CDs arrived broken, as they had not been packed securely enough, or USBs were unlabelled or perhaps even encrypted, without any note of the password included with the submission. Recording formats continue to be a minor if time-consuming problem: the ASG requires and recommends .wav files and MP3 as commonly playable on most IT devices. Other formats, such as AIFF and MP4 are not readable on some computers, and should be avoided if possible. There were still a very few examples of both scores and recordings being submitted as MIDI or Sibelius files, neither of which are acceptable. Centres are asked to keep copies of all submissions in case of loss or damage, and this once again proved vital to the assessment process for a few students during the marking period.

My thanks go to my team of examiners for this component, my Team Leaders, Rob Galliard and Nick Kerrison, and Michael Nicholas, Chief Examiner. This component requires a wide and deep skillset to set, teach or to be examined on and its continued success bears witness to the hard work and dedication of all involved.

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