Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2022

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

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General Introduction

After two years without coursework for this unit being submitted for assessment by examiners, and with the 2022 cohort of students also having been prevented from sitting their GCSEs, in 2020, there was much speculation as to the standard of work that might be expected. In the end, thanks to the hard work and dedication of both students and their teachers, the overall standard of work submitted was very similar to that of previous years. The adaptations to the specification for this unit, for 2022 only, were quite major – students were required to submit one free composition, lasting a minimum of three minutes, and were not required to complete a Brief Assessing Technique. There were also no Pearson-set Composition briefs to work from, which meant that all students set their own purpose and audience and occasion for their composition. The responses to this freedom of choice were many, and varied, with students submitting music in a wide variety of styles and genres and achieving marks from high single figures through to the maximum of 40 for this unit.

Popularity of options

Most compositions fell into one of several broad categories, outlined below, with the approximate percentages for each:
'Classical' pastiche (pre-20th century) 34%
Pop/Jazz 23%
Film/TV music 22%
20th/21st century styles (atonal/minimalism/experimental) 11%
Fusions 5%
Musical theatre 3%

In addition there were small numbers of submissions in Hard Rock, Gospel, Rap, Folk, Electronic dance music and Latin-American styles, as well as a few pieces for Brass Band, all of which made up around 2% of submissions.

Students of all abilities attempted compositions in all of these styles, with the fullest spread of marks achieved in the four most popular – Classical pastiche, Film/TV music, 20th/21st century styles, and Pop and Jazz. It was interesting to note that although still popular, Film and TV genre submissions were not quite as numerous as in previous years. An informal survey of examiners seemed to suggest that 'pastiche' compositions based on Baroque, Classical or Romantic models were marginally more successful than those in Popular or Jazz styles, with the average result for Film and TV submissions being lowered by some very unfocused efforts. Many students wrote for their own instruments or voices, or for combinations in which they performed regularly. Others chose set works for the specification as a starting point. Whatever the stimulus, it was encouraging to see the enthusiastic engagement, imagination, and creativity with which the composing process had been approached.

Free Composition

Importance of the Assessment Criteria

A good understanding of the Assessment criteria grids 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

There were some very well-structured pieces, with fluency, variety and a sophisticated shape, but these were the exception rather than the rule. More typical pieces fell into Level 3 for this criterion, achieving a workable overall shape but perhaps lacking a sense of wholeness and perhaps some fluency or variety. Although there were more level 4 marks this year, level 5 still eluded all but the strongest students. Some of the weaker efforts were Film/TV music scores where a fast-changing, complex narrative was so closely followed ('mickey-mousing') that any longer-term musical coherence was difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Students of such pieces might well have been better off covering less narrative ground by establishing   fewer ideas more thoroughly.

This grid can earn a maximum of 13/40 of the marks for this unit. This criterion 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 the bar to bar coherence of the music in terms of a sense of direction. Careful control of melodic shape and structure, harmonic and tonal variety, and rhythmic flow can all contribute to this level of organisation. 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 found. The creation of, and development of, distinctive musical ideas is also key to success in this criterion. Work scoring highly in this criterion included some very strong work based on Baroque, Classical or Romantic models, Film music scores where the sections had been skilfully linked, 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. In the Film music context weaker submissions often presented ideas as part of a sectional structure, with either pauses between different material or abrupt changes without any transition.   At this level, although established musical 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 three minutes was met by the vast majority of students, with examples of very successful pieces lasting up to nearly twice that

time. Some students did try to 'shoehorn' quite complex structures into the shorter timespan, sometimes resulting in rather abrupt endings, while much longer pieces tended to lose direction and were sometimes unable to maintain the interest of the listener, suggesting that some editing could have been beneficial.

Grid 2 Creating and developing musical ideas with expressive control

Music's expressive powers across the range of genres and styles is the focus of this criteria. This grid 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 or above were often achieved by the stronger submissions, while weaker work often merited only the top of level two (5/14). This criterion 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. Although melodic, harmonic and rhythmic effects were often exploited by students, as well as changes in sonority, there was less evidence of the expressive use of other elements, such as dynamics and tempo, which can do so much to enhance the impact. The wording of the second bullet point of the assessment criteria for this grid should be carefully noted by students, demanding as it does 'contrasted and well-paced moods, atmospheres and effects': pieces lacking even basic levels of contrast are unlikely to score well in this criterion. The most frequent shortcoming here however was that the student's brief was simply too vague ('a piece for a school concert'/'Instrumental music')', meaning that it was difficult to achieve the fitness for purpose required to access the higher levels of the assessment grid in this criterion. Some of the more successful efforts for this criterion were Film Music scores, which usually had more of a focus and often a keen sense of drama and style. 'Black and white' contrasts of mood or atmosphere are not required here, but some candidates did struggle to create even basic contrasts in this respect.

Grid 3 Creating and developing musical ideas with technical control

This criterion supplies a maximum of 13/40 of the marks for this unit. 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 criterion 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 criterion 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 or unvaried 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.

The majority of compositions were to briefs provided by the students themselves. Students often chose genres or styles with which they were familiar as a performer, or perhaps ones related to the set works in paper 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.

Administration

2022 SAS the first year in which submissions for this unit were made solely via the online platform. In most respects this was a successful change, removing the uncertainties of the postal service and the opportunities for materials to be omitted or damaged in transit. There were of course some technical problems caused by this change, which both centres and examiners may have experienced, but these could mostly be overcome. One feature of reading scores from a screen is that very large ensembles can make it very difficult to see a whole page at once, while still being able to read individual lines: it may be useful in such cases for empty staves to be hidden, in order that the score can be more easily read. A wider range of recording formats were permitted for 2022 and while .wav and MP3 files were generally the most commonly used, there were examples of very large files, often in a video format, which were difficult and time-consuming for examiners to download for access. There were still a very few examples of both scores and recordings being submitted as MIDI or Sibelius files, neither of which are acceptable. There were also a few examples of mis-labelled files, incorrect candidate numbers or unsigned or incomplete CAS forms. Centres are asked to keep copies of all submissions in case of problems with those uploaded.

This component requires a wide and deep skillset to set, teach or to be examined on in even without the additional problems caused by the pandemic in the last two years. That such a positive overall result for this unit can be reported is testament to the hard work, skill, and dedication of the students, and of course their teachers. I look forward, hopefully, to a return to the full specification for this unit in 2023.