



General Certificate of Education

MUSIC 1271

MUSC2

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - June series

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MUSC 2

Introduction

The new Unit 2 provided teachers and examiners alike with something familiar and something new: teachers acquainted with the old AQA Specification will see a degree of continuity with the new Brief B; some will see Brief A as a return to tried and tested methods, while for others it is a new skill to teach; finally Brief C is probably something of a new departure for all concerned.

The majority of candidates undertook Brief A or B; Brief C candidates were relatively few. Often all candidates from one centre chose (or had been steered towards) the same Brief. The examiners acknowledge that many factors will be involved in this decision, not least the simplicity of organising teaching time if all candidates take the same option; however, teachers may like to think more carefully whether there is a case for playing more to the strengths of individual pupils in this area.

The submissions

Brief A

The essential factor of this brief – that the given material was to be a permanent and unchanged part of the candidate's solution – appears to have been understood by all. A few chose to submit their solution in handwritten form (usually pencil) on the Briefs as issued (the question paper): a perfectly acceptable format. The majority chose to copy the given material in electronic form. This process needs to be done with the utmost care and thoroughly checked: in a significant number of cases an error had been made in copying.

Question 1: Harmonisation of a 16-bar diatonic melody

There were some excellent solutions to this question that showed a confidence in handling tonal harmony, a sure handling of cadential patterns, a resourcefulness extending to the occasional chromatic inflection, and successful part-writing that produced a bright texture and incorporated moments of dissonance, with lower parts providing moving parts. The best showed a clear awareness of style that augurs well for the more explicit Bachian challenge of Unit 5.

Elsewhere candidates supplied less musically convincing moments which were borne either of inappropriate harmonic progressions or weaknesses of technique in writing in four parts. Common weaknesses included:

- failure to recognise the modulation to the relative minor in the 3rd phrase
- difficulty in harmonising the E flat in the final phrase
- the inclusion of frequent 2nd inversion chords outside cadential locations
- the use of the same bass note either side of a bar line (only really appropriate to the style when the chord on the downbeat is the dynamic 3rd inversion of a 7th chord – a rather advanced option for AS)
- use of the rather unidiomatic V to IV progression
- overuse of chord III
- diminished triads (VII in the major; II in the minor) used in root position

- preceding a cadential I_c-V-I pattern (e.g. bar 15) with chord V, thereby nullifying the function of the I_c chord in delaying the expected dominant harmony
- doubled major 3rds or chords with no 3rd
- excessively wide or frequent leaps, especially in alto or tenor parts
- leaps of an augmented 2nd or augmented 4th
- would-be passing notes that were departed by leap
- frequent use of consecutive 5^{ths} and 8^{ves} (it should be noted that a diminished 5th moving to a perfect 5th is acceptable unless one of the parts involved is the bass), including those created by a passing note

Some quite successful solutions would have benefited further from some of the following ideas:

- anticipating the modulation to D minor rather sooner in the 3rd phrase through the early incorporation of a C#
- incorporating a sense of imperfect cadence, or dominant harmony, at the mid-phrase points in bars 2, 6 and 10
- using VII_b instead of V_c in progressions such as I – VII_b – I_b
- more stylish use of the dominant 7th in perfect cadences: this is usually best as a passing note
- refraining from including a 4-3 suspension on the dominant chord in a I_c – V – I progression
- brightening the texture by keeping the tenor part high (often above the staff)
- creating a stronger or more flowing bass line

Many candidates would benefit from attempting to sing each of the harmony parts they create; this might iron out some of the more abrupt and unlikely moments.

A small proportion of candidates attempted a solution for an instrumental ensemble. This is a valid option, but careful musical thought needs to be given to the scoring. In this particular question, writing for a standard woodwind quartet was probably an ill-advised choice with the given melody going rather low for the flute and with little room left for the oboe on the 'alto' line (where the oboe is liable to be rather strident in tone). A solution for brass quartet, maybe even having a freer approach to harmonic rhythm with a mix of minim and crotchet chords, might have been a better choice.

Question 2: Controlling texture

In comparison to the Harmonisation question, there was slightly less spread of standard in solutions to this question, with fewer excellent or really poor submissions. In the majority of cases the composed melodic lines had an appropriate harmonic fit to the given material, with perhaps just the occasional miscalculation.

Although many were adept at 'solving' the question harmonically, fewer were accomplished at producing real musical character from their melodic lines. Partly this was due to an absence of thinking in phrases. Beyond this the examiners urge future candidates to consider carefully how they might obtain control and variety of musical character from the following elements:

- melodic contour: including both conjunct and disjunct moments, and not relying on arpeggio figuration
- rhythm: not becoming a slave to one particular note value (whether crotchets or semiquavers) and not merely replicating the rhythm of the given material
- register: carefully considering the capabilities and tonal character of the candidate's chosen instrumentation

- texture: incorporating a mix of textures (as implied by the title of this question) including imitation, dialogue, voice-swapping and melodies doubled in 3^{rds} or 6^{ths}
- dissonance: finding opportunity for using some additional factors in the harmony such as 7^{ths} suspended from the previous chord

The best solutions make use of many, if not all, of these factors rather than being reliant on just one. Where dependence is too much on, say, rhythmic energy (rather than rhythmic interest being used ornamentally) textural interest and control is often compromised. When the whole piece is based on melodic lines doubled in 3^{rds}, the texture can easily become rather bland or cloying.

Other aspects which impress are a feeling for the ebb and flow of the music so that momentum and intensity builds for the significant moments of the piece (for example, the final cadence), and idiomatic writing for the chosen instruments. This latter quality is subtle but very evident when present; it is not achieved through having two random bars of *pizzicato* for the violin.

Candidates should be encouraged to make full use of the given material. This should include responding to sections that are based on harmonic sequences (there were two such passages in this year's question: many missed at least one opportunity), and covering moments of rest or stasis in the given accompaniment with something of interest in the melodic lines (in return, opportunity could be found for a small break between melodic phrases when the accompaniment is harmonically active). The better candidates found some element in the given bass line that could inform some phrases in their melodic lines.

There was a suspicion that candidates, having done their best to steer clear of consecutive 5^{ths} and 8^{ves} in question 1 of Brief A, dropped their guards to some extent on question 2. Here consecutives were a common error, often involving octaves with the given bass line.

Candidates with an instinct for writing melodies that are idiomatic to the style represented here were able to demonstrate their command of the musical character of their melodies by careful annotation with appropriate bowing and/or articulation marks, and were rewarded accordingly. As with the instinct for suitable writing for one's chosen instrument, it is clear when these marks have been sought without musical understanding through the excessive use of wildly contrasting dynamic markings, accents, and so forth.

Brief B

Brief B proved to be a popular option and there was a wide range of idiom represented in the composing work that was submitted.

The Brief requires candidates to write a piece that fits one of four genres:

- Keyboard music
- Small ensemble
- Vocal music
- Electronic music

Nearly all candidates conformed to this requirement, though some saw 'small ensemble' through somewhat Wagnerian eyes. Candidates are probably well-advised to resist the urge to write for what amounts to a small chamber orchestra: remember there are only 20 hours available, and the more staves with which one starts, the more there is to do, and the more potential there is for doing it with error, misjudgement or lack of control. Similarly, a candidate who is reluctant to write a piece under the 'keyboard music' category for solo piano, might

reflect on whether this is due to an unease about writing pianistically. Should this be the case, is it judicious to include a piano in the small ensemble? Few candidates chose to submit an example of electronic music in this first year of the specification.

The old specification required candidates to write two compositions with an aggregate duration of 4-10 minutes; now candidates write a single piece lasting 3-6 minutes: a longer minimum duration for a piece. This means that the issue of structure takes on greater significance, and the examiners would like to encourage more candidates to spend time thinking about a plan for their piece. This might well be done prior to the start of controlled time so that candidates have a plan in their heads at the start of the formal composing period, thereby allowing for a confident start to be made in the first hour.

More candidates need to be encouraged to realise that structure is not a jelly mould into which notes are poured; rather it is a by-product of how all the elements of the composer's art are handled. Structure relates to how long an opening musical idea is extended and explored before something of musical contrast is introduced. From this point on there is the open possibility of returning to the opening idea at some point. Some candidates provide a torrent of melodic shapes without any interesting changes of key, rhythm, texture or instrumentation, with the result that the ear fails to latch on any melodic shapes of significance whilst never really hearing any moments of structural significance.

Extending one's opening idea is, largely, a case of continuing its musical substance: the melodic shape, the tonality, the harmonic vocabulary, the tempo and metre, the rhythmic profile, the texture, the instrumentation, etc. If the plan is to maintain the opening idea for a 3rd of the piece, then perhaps some change in one or two of these elements might be beneficial: how about the melody starting in the bass (piano L.H.) and then repeating at the top of the texture at a louder dynamic, whilst other aspects of the musical idea remain much the same? At this juncture a more marked contrast may well be needed, if the sense of a 'middle section' is intended. It is not enough just to declare that a particular bar is the start of the 'B' section and then carry on in much the same vein: a well-considered change of musical character will be required. A change of key, some new rhythmic patterns, a different metre and/or tempo, a further alteration to texture or instrumentation all offer exciting and effective ways of achieving this.

Candidates may like to note carefully that the mark scheme enables examiners to give some credit for the care and detail with which the score or annotation is prepared. Those who did this well tended to access the upper marks of whatever mark band the musical content of their composition indicated.

Brief C

Although there was relatively only a small number of Brief C submissions, a wide range of approaches was seen by examiners, and there was also, almost inevitably, a wide range of standard.

Among the styles attempted were classical, folk, country and western, soul, heavy rock and punk. Some were successful; in other instances it seemed that insufficient preparation had been undertaken before embarking on the piece. If a candidate feels that it will be desirable to change the metre of the given melody to suit the intended idiom, it is probably best to work out how to do this as a separate exercise before beginning the piece. Likewise, it may well be beneficial to work out one or more harmonisations of the given melody as an initial step.

Some candidates restricted their melodic material almost entirely to the given folk tune. If this is to be the approach, it might be best to take certain figures from the melody and use them as motifs in the accompaniment, though few tried this. The better examples this year discreetly blended the given melody with some new countermelodies. Some candidates made use of changing key midway through the arrangement. One of the most striking began the piece in the minor mode, only modulating to the relative major for the central section. Generally the examiner would hope to see more exploration of varied textures in this option next year.

Many of the comments above (under Brief B) regarding the structuring of a piece of at least 3 minutes duration pertain to this option too.

Administration

The examiners are pleased to be able to report that there were few problems arising from the administration of this new unit. The two most frequent slips were unsigned Candidate Record Forms and technical errors on recordings. Those seeking confirmation of what is required should consult this checklist:

- collate each candidate's score or annotation at the end of the controlled time
- complete Candidate Record Form for each candidate, remembering the signatures
- fold each Candidate Record Form around its corresponding score/annotation
- complete the Attendance Record form
- enclose the recording(s).

There are some particular points to which the examiners would like to draw attention:

- it is not necessary to enclose individual instrumental parts in addition to a full score
- paper can be saved, postage costs reduced and the examiner's task made simpler in some cases by reducing the default stave size on some software packages to guarantee more than one system (and occasionally one bar) per page
- the preferred format for recordings is a compilation CD for all your candidates, clearly labelled and accompanied by a track list
- if the CD is well labelled, time-consuming aural announcements are not necessary
- please make sure that your compilation CD has been properly formatted before sending it off to the examiner: in a couple of cases examiners this year received CDs that did not play
- please make sure that the centre and candidate numbers are on the first page of the score/annotation.

Final word

It is always fascinating for examiners to view candidates' creative work, and the first experience of this unit has proved no exception. The examiners found much which delighted them, and wish to thank teachers for steering their candidates through the new controlled time and for handling the administration of the unit so efficiently.

Mark Range and Award of Grades

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