



## **General Certificate of Education**

**MUSIC 2271**

**MUSC5**

# **Report on the Examination**

*2010 examination - June series*

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## MUSC5

The options in this new unit gave scope for widely differing approaches to A2 composition and candidates took full advantage of this. It was very pleasing to find outstanding work in all three Briefs, and candidates' reviews often indicated a real relish for their chosen task. Work was neatly and clearly presented, and the examiners were helped greatly by good organisation and prompt despatch from centres.

Briefs A, B and C were administered as separate units and final entries needed to indicate the actual Brief worked by the candidate. This requirement was missed by a significant number of centres, and inaccurate entries only became apparent when the parcel of work arrived. Retrospective adjustments to entries were made by AQA, but it is hoped that centres will be more aware of this next year as an uncorrected entry could affect the grade awarded.

All MUSC5 submissions must include a review of the work submitted, and a surprising number of candidates omitted this. The review is included in the mark scheme and helps to illuminate the candidate's intentions and understanding of their work. There is more information about reviews under the separate briefs in this report, and examples will be made available in the Teacher Resource Bank.

### Brief A

This was a popular option and there was ample evidence of very thorough teaching. It was very encouraging to find candidates describing the chorales and string quartets they had sung, played and heard as it is vital to be familiar with these genres in their live musical contexts and not just as visual exercises.

### Question 1 – Chorale

A good solution showed understanding of Bach's sound world. Beyond the overall aural effect, examiners were looking for:

- a purposeful and melodic bass line
- stylish cadences
- modulation to appropriate keys
- a wide choice of chords and inversions
- avoidance of technical errors such as consecutive fifths and octaves and unwise doublings
- interesting movement in the inner parts, including passing notes.

The most common weaknesses displayed were:

- a bass line which was static or conversely had awkward leaps, including augmented intervals
- limited modulation. The melody invited modulation from G minor to B flat major and F major. More adventurous candidates reached E flat major (bar 12) and even hinted at D minor or F minor
- poor use of second inversion chords. Some used second inversions freely without awareness of their need to resolve; others introduced the passing 6/4 progression at every possible opportunity and thereby reduced the inventiveness of the harmonisation

- problems associated with the minor mode. Chord II is diminished in the minor mode and sounds ugly in root position, although the first inversion is effective. Melodic lines need to avoid augmented intervals such as E flat to F sharp
- poor spacing or dull movement in the inner parts
- consecutive fifths and octaves. Some candidates clearly checked for consecutives but then added passing notes which reintroduced problems
- use of seventh chords without preparation or resolution
- inappropriate use of chromatic chords. It was possible to include one or more diminished sevenths, but only where they could be approached and left suitably. Augmented sixths and Neapolitan sixths are extremely rare in this style and are best left to the string quartet.

## Question 2 – String Quartet

The overall effect of the quartet is the first consideration, along with its suitability for strings. A number of candidates created problems by copying the question inaccurately, thus changing harmonic implications. Errors in copying applied particularly to the dynamics supplied in the question. These were intended to help towards the setting and it was unfortunate that they were so frequently replaced with alternatives. In particular, the *crescendo* in bars 13-14 should have given rise to an increase in tension through harmony or texture, and should have encouraged the treatment of the first B in bar 15 as a suspension. Enterprising candidates used rising or falling bass lines, sometimes chromatic, to good effect. The indicated echo effect in bars 31-32 could also have called forth a harmonic or textural response.

Guidance for this unit states that candidates should copy out the question individually if using composing software. Where all candidates from a centre had the same wrong note in the given part it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that a single copy of the question had been shared.

Examiners were looking for:

- appropriate harmony
- good use of the instruments with some variety of texture
- an inventive response to bars 24-28, which were to be based on bars 1-4
- detailed editing of the score for all instruments

The most common weaknesses were:

- failure to appreciate the harmonic implications of the given part. The cadence at bar 4 should be perfect but many solutions were misled by the decorative melody and used an unlikely plagal cadence
- frequent consecutive fifths and octaves. These were particularly common between viola and cello, perhaps because the alto clef was less familiar.
- harmonising a phrase without regard to what was to follow. Solutions which reached A minor in bar 12 or A major in bar 28 had no space for the necessary transition to G major
- inappropriate textures. The more complex harmonies of bars 16-22 were sometimes avoided by writing in octaves throughout. Elsewhere instruments sometimes seemed to be rested out of indecision rather than by design
- instruments crossing in ineffective ways eg second violin rising to obscure the melody, or viola dipping below the cello and affecting the harmonic basis
- using a very narrow range of chords. The passage from bar 28-36 was sometimes confined to chords V and I in root position where there was scope to change inversion, increase the harmonic rhythm and even introduce some chromaticism in the bass line.

The best solutions were written with a personal understanding of string playing and enterprising harmonies. A number of candidates spotted the possibility of an augmented sixth chord in G major at bar 23, though not many saw the similar opportunity at bar 21. There were even some deft writers who hinted at a Neapolitan 6<sup>th</sup> in bar 20. It must be stressed that the chromatic chords listed in the specification should be used 'as appropriate' and it is not expected that every listed feature will be found in a particular year's question. Some answers also found inventive ways of using ideas from the given material in the lower parts. At its best this was delightful and stylish, but there were cases where it was attempted when harmonically impossible.

Reviews in Brief A need not be extensive and there is no need to describe features which are obvious in the score. It is helpful to discuss options considered in a solution such as alternative cadences for a chorale phrase, or the intentions of bars 24-28 in the string quartet.

## **Brief B**

The free composition option gave many candidates the opportunity to write for their own instrument or ensemble, and it was always an advantage when voices and instruments were used idiomatically and sympathetically. A wide range of styles was presented. Many were based on genres well known to the candidate but few were a specific pastiche of a named composer, although this is a possible option. The majority were submitted with a score but there were some detailed annotations, some in tabular form and others referring to the recording by timing. It is important to be as specific as possible so that it is easy to follow the recording with the annotation.

There were some different interpretations of the option to write a composition in *three separate, related sections*. It is perfectly acceptable to write, for example, a sonata in three short movements for the same instrumental combination, or a set of two or three songs, provided that they are clearly related by features such as ensemble, text and key. Such submissions must be intended for performance as a single work, although they may have natural 'movement breaks'. In some cases candidates submitted two compositions for different ensembles and with no musical connection. This breaches the requirements, which were clearly set out in the Brief, and only one of the pieces was marked. It should be remembered that the mark scheme asks for secure handling of structure and development and this may be easier to demonstrate in a single substantial movement than in a set of miniatures.

Examiners were looking for:

- a clear and satisfying structure
- the range and effectiveness of harmonic movement and modulation
- strong material developed appropriately
- understanding and exploitation of the resources used
- musical logic, interest and inventiveness

The most common weaknesses were:

- a limited choice of harmonies, sometimes restricted to primary triads in root position in one or two keys
- unsympathetic use of instruments. Some piano parts were unplayable or written for one hand only; wind parts were written without consideration for breathing; *pizzicato* was used in improbable contexts

- unlikely ensembles. There were several examples of double bass in a solo string ensemble (sometimes replacing cello) which proved difficult to balance. Some compositions established a very large ensemble in which certain instruments were hardly used
- compositions which reached the five-minute time guideline only by heavy use of repetition without variety or development
- pieces in a minimalist style which failed to explore the variety and complexity of harmony expected at this level.

The review should discuss the intention of the composition and reflect on its success. It may be helpful to describe some stages in the compositional process and to indicate options which were considered but not taken. The source of any text should be acknowledged. The effect of the review should be to give a larger picture of the context in which the piece was written. Candidates could be asked to consider what they would say to an audience when introducing a performance as a first step.

### **Brief C**

In this option most candidates were writing in a pop, rock or jazz style with which they were familiar, and their practical experience of the genre paid dividends. Examiners were delighted to discover some live performances of pieces for large instrumental ensembles, although it is perfectly acceptable to submit a synthesised recording.

The features looked for are very similar to those listed in Brief B with the addition of the candidate's use of the set piece. In the best examples harmonic progressions and melodic or rhythmic features of the Brahms Hungarian Dance were skilfully used and often re-imagined in inventive ways. Many retained the excitement of the original piece while dressing it in new clothes.

The most common weaknesses were:

- lack of understanding of the chosen ensemble
- repeated use of a single feature from the model without development
- basing a piece on a short chord pattern which remained unchanged throughout
- simplifying the harmonies of the Brahms model so that the resulting piece was based almost entirely on tonic and dominant chords
- remaining in the same key throughout the piece, without even the change of mode in the original.

The aim in this brief is to produce a piece which is satisfying in itself to a listener who does not know the original, but which uses the given material in fresh and varied ways.

The review should follow the pattern of a Brief B review, but it should include information on how and why parts of the model were selected and used.

### **Practicalities**

A few comments on presentation may be useful.

- there is no need to submit the Briefs paper unless the candidate has worked on it.
- CDs should be in audio format and not sent as Sibelius files
- please do not include material for MUSC6 (or for any other unit) on the CD submitted for MUSC5

- it is perfectly acceptable to submit the chorale in short score, and no dynamics are expected in this question. However, candidates should be reminded to include the pauses as their omission caused a few writers to miss important cadences
- in Briefs B and C candidates may be helped to shrink their scores to a study-score size and to print double-sided if possible in order to reduce page-turns and save paper.
- Centres which have entries for more than one option are asked to submit separate CDs for each brief in future. For example, please provide a composite CD for all Brief A candidates and a separate CD for all Brief B candidates.

## **Mark Range and Award of Grades**

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