



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
June 2011**

**Music**

**MUSC2**

**(Specification 2270)**

**Unit 2: Composing: Creating Musical Ideas**

***Report on the Examination***

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## **MUSC2 Composing: Creating Musical Ideas**

### **Introduction**

Now in its third year, many of the aspects of MUSC2 have become familiar, and the examiners have enjoyed another year of interesting, and at times intriguing, scripts from all three of the briefs.

Briefs A and B continue to be the more popular options – this year Brief B attracted more than half of all candidates. Brief C remains a minority choice, but suits some candidates very well. Between them, the three briefs undoubtedly play to differing strengths represented among the candidature, and it is encouraging that some centres are able to explore this aspect by making it possible for some of their candidates to pursue Brief A whilst others take B or C.

### **The submissions**

#### **Brief A**

This brief continues to offer two contrasting tasks. The first puts the spotlight on various aspects of harmony: the ability to comprehend tonal implications of a melody that modulates to related keys, a skill for writing successful cadential patterns, an ear for creating strong harmonic progressions, and a fluency in doing all this with an overall sense of a consistent and persuasive style in which the part-writing is successful, both in terms of each individual line and the way they combine in the texture.

The second task provides the harmonic framework and instead challenges candidates to use this as a stimulus for two melodic lines. Here the challenge involves composing melodies that have a secure harmonic fit with the given accompaniment, and also have a convincing musical character due to their contour and rhythmic content, as well as a convincing sense of phrase structure. It is also important to engage with matters of texture as these melodic lines are developed: how do the two parts interact with each other, and also with the given bass line, and how is register explored during the course of the piece? The musical quality of all these aspects, and the extent to which the composer is aware of the musical character, can be conveyed through the care with which performance directions are shown on the score: tempo, dynamics, articulation, etc.

A few candidates still choose traditional pencil and manuscript paper for their submissions (in Brief A sometimes writing solutions directly onto the Briefs paper). The vast majority, however, used computers. In Brief A this requires them to transcribe the given material. It is vitally important that errors are not made during this process. This may need candidates to learn to use features of their chosen software they have not currently explored, such as how to enter a second voice part on a given staff. Equally, it is very important that no alterations – unintentional or otherwise – are made to the given material whilst completing the tasks. Checking the given part on the computer screen against AQA's published paper from time to time is advisable.

## Question 1: Harmonisation of a 16-bar diatonic melody

For the first time in the life of the current specification, this year's task presented a melody in triple time. This necessitated there being fewer chords to handle and, indeed, fewer phrases and cadences too. On the other hand, the melody had a slightly asymmetric feature in that the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> phrases each began with an anacrusis of an octave leap. This element challenged some candidates. Some attempted to put the cadences resolving onto the anacrusis beats in spite of the phrase marks in the given melody; rather more found the octave leaps difficult to deal with, especially in terms of spacing. Many found 1<sup>st</sup> inversion chords helpful on the anacrusis beats, which makes it easier to double soprano and alto parts at this point.

### *Tonality*

Just about all candidates recognised F major as the tonic key for the question. Some missed the clear opportunity for a modulation to the dominant in bar 8, there being no B natural in the melodic line to point the way. Yet the dominant is not a strange choice of key for the halfway point of such a melody. More were aware of the implications of the C<sup>#</sup> in bar 11 and found a cadence in D minor at this point. The move to the relative minor was not always convincing; a C major chord at b.11<sup>1</sup> produces an unlikely false relation in this bar.

Bars 9-10 provided a significant moment. A minority realised that there was the opportunity to pass through G minor at this point, a route that allows for the sophistication of a chromatic F<sup>#</sup> in the harmonic writing. Just a few realised that this could be enhanced further by finding a way to include the other accidental G minor brings – an E flat. These candidates were duly rewarded by the examiners for their resourcefulness and understanding of tonal implications.

### *Cadences*

Most candidates realised that an imperfect cadence was required for b.3<sup>3</sup> – 4<sup>1</sup>, and a variety of options were available including II → V, IV → V, and IVb → V. Fewer successfully handled the cadence in b.7-8. The strongest and most likely option was Ic → V → I in C major. It was surprising how many failed to include the dominant 7<sup>th</sup> note here, and many who tried handled it inappropriately, failing to remember that it needs to resolve by falling stepwise onto the next chord. A small number attempted an interrupted cadence at this point, usually V → VI. Though technically possible, the midway point is, perhaps, an unlikely place to deploy an interrupted cadence.

Both the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final phrases invited perfect cadences, firstly in D minor and then back in the tonic F major, and there were plenty of candidates who successfully accepted the invitation. Use of the dominant 7<sup>th</sup> was infrequent, however. It always requires careful handling where, as in these two phrases, the melody moves from leading note to tonic at the cadence.

### *Harmony*

Away from the cadences there are fewer constraints on chord choice and this tests candidates' ability to use harmony appropriately, resourcefully and even creatively. This comparative freedom means that examiners see a wide range of solutions. Successful – consonant – harmonisations can be very simple, using primary triads and largely root position chords, but with an ear for the sense of harmonic progression to create momentum towards the cadences. More sophisticated solutions engage with secondary triads, different inversions for chords, and maybe even some more advanced touches such as suspensions and chromatic inflections.

Teachers wondering which of these approaches should be recommended to pupils can be given no simple answer: all depends on the detail as to how successful either approach becomes. A simple approach can lead to repetitive harmony and an inelegant bass line that frequently hops in 4ths back and forth between dominant, tonic and subdominant. A more sophisticated approach can easily become a weak harmonic progression with inappropriate chord choices (III is rarely a good choice; IV generally should not follow V) or poorly chosen inversions at specific moments (downbeats are rarely a good place to unleash VIb). Good advice is to listen carefully to what is being written, ideally attempting to play or sing the music oneself.

### *Style*

Successful solutions not only need to find good chord progressions but also need to arrange those chords so as to produce good part-writing. This is often the area in which a promising attempt falls short of fully-fledged success.

Each individual part needs to have a good shape. This is particularly true of choral solutions where each line needs to fit a vocal range and avoid those difficult to sing intervals such as augmented 2nds, augmented 4ths and major 7ths, but these attributes are also relevant to instrumental contexts.

Considering the combination of parts brings further issues into play. The script that avoids all parallel 5ths and octaves is rare. The conscientious candidate can carefully check for these and miss those that occur between the end of one phrase and the start of the next, especially where this moment falls at the end of a system. Parallels created by the insertion of a passing note are also common.

Spacing between parts is another area that can lead to moments of weakness. It is important not to let the tenor move too low, something which leads to a rather lopsided or bottom-heavy texture. Generally it should not be necessary to let parts overlap.

Though examiners welcome solutions in either open or closed score, they tend to find more of these errors in the answers presented in open score: candidates perhaps find this harder to check.

Good style can often suggest the use of passing notes. Candidates should make sure that passing notes are both approached and departed by step. Some candidates successfully decorate cadences with suspensions in an inner voice part.

*An overview*

Teachers and candidates may like to refer to the following chart which summarises much of what examiners are looking for in this question:

	Weak	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	Strong
Tonality	Little evidence of awareness of key centre	Less than half the test shows awareness of key centres	Aware of key centres approximately half the time	Some secure key centres, but more than one uncertain area	Largely assured grasp of key centres: some misjudgement	Confident grasp of key centres throughout					
Cadences	Difficulty with cadences in general	Less than half the cadences handled with some success	Approximately half the cadences handled successfully	Some strong cadences but more than one unsuccessful	Cadences largely assured, but occasional misjudgement	Confident and stylish cadences					
Harmony	Few moments of convincing harmonic progression	Frequent concerns regarding chord choices	Some concerns regarding chord choices	Some successful phrases but at least one unconvincing	Largely assured progression with a few misjudged moments	Confident and convincing progression throughout					
Style	Little evidence of control in handling part-writing	Partial success with part-writing, but errors/slips in most bars	Some success with part-writing, but errors /slips in all phrases	Clear evidence of good part-writing, but errors / slips in several phrases	Mostly a secure musical grammar with a few slips	Stylish part-writing and spacing					

**Question 2: Controlling texture**

After a triple time question for this task last year, the 2011 task reverted to 4/4 but candidates had to contend with a minor key. Over past years examiners have found that candidates generally fare better on the harmonisation question, and, whether or not the minor key was significant in this, the contrast was heightened in this year's scripts.

*Harmonic fit*

The first aspect that examiners consider is the harmonic fit of the melodic lines written. This is grasped by a large proportion of candidates: the given accompanimental material provides a harmonic framework and the melodies must complement this. Where candidates fall short in this regard, it is often because complex melodic lines incorporate constant quaver (or even semiquaver) motion where some notes cannot be justified in terms of harmonic fit. Such justification has to be one of the following: a harmony note, a passing note, an auxiliary note, an appoggiatura or a suspension. It is possible that two simultaneous notes – maybe a passing note in one melody and an appoggiatura in the other – whilst each justifiable separately, together make for an unconvincing dissonance.

This year's question included a few tricky moments in this regard: the suspensions in bars 2 and 4, and the auxiliary bass notes on the 2<sup>nd</sup> beat of bars 9, 11 and 12 needed careful handling, and many candidates got into difficulty at one or more of these places.

### *Melodic lines*

An essential element of this task is to be able to craft stylish melodic lines. This is an area in which many candidates fall short. There are three main aspects that need considering:

- The rhythmic character
- The melodic contour
- The phrase structure

Rhythm has the potential to generate a confident sense of musical character in a candidate's work. This opportunity is lost if there is a total reliance on a single note value (typically quavers) or a seemingly random kaleidoscope of rhythmic features (some seem unable to resist the allure of triplet crotchets – an unlikely device in the idiom of this year's question). Rhythmic features that candidates might profitably be encouraged to adopt include:

- Quaver + 2 semiquavers
- 2 semiquavers + quaver
- An anacrusis quaver, or three anacrusis semiquavers
- The syncopation of quaver + crotchet + quaver (but probably not semiquaver + quaver + semiquaver)
- Dotted quaver + semiquaver

(In all Briefs examiners see so few dotted rhythms they wonder just how many know how to produce these from score-writing software.) Melodic contours can vary effectively during the course of the piece; however, examiners see many where the lines meander without much sense of purpose or character. Three styles of contour can be effective:

- Arpeggio (not to be relied upon for the whole piece)
- Conjunct (usually achieved through passing notes)
- A confident leap followed by conjunct (to be used more than once)

Candidates who are aware of a phrase structure to the overall piece are well placed to find good moments to change either (or both) of the style of the melodic contour and the rhythmic character. This year's task naturally fell into three sections:

- Bars 1-4: a 2-bar phrase treated to sequence a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> higher
- Bars 5-8: a classic falling circle of 5ths sequence
- Bars 9-17: a longer section building to the final *tierce de Picardie*

There was some disappointment regarding the handling of the sequences this year: many candidates missed one (or even both) of the opportunities. Resourceful solutions reversed the role of each instrument during the sequence.

### *Texture*

A further testing element of the task here is that two melodic lines have to be worked above the given accompaniment and this necessitates consideration of the texture. This makes it very important to consider carefully which instruments to choose. Those candidates that write for a tenor or bass instrument such as cello are very likely to find the texture difficult to control (though it can be done successfully this way). A range of textures can be used:

- Short antiphonal phrases
- Doubling in 3rds and 6ths
- Imitative entries
- Free counterpoint

High scoring solutions often explore more than one of these textures, choosing a significant moment (i.e. the start of a new phrase) to make a change. Common weaknesses in texture include:

- Only writing for one instrument at any given time throughout the piece
- Relying solely on doubling between the parts
- Doubling of the given bass part (this creates glaring parallels)
- A cello part that goes beneath the bass of the given accompaniment and thus compromises the piece
- Melodic writing that is totally stavebound and fails to explore the available registers of the instruments selected
- Downbeats where there is a bare open 5<sup>th</sup> between the two melodies and the bass

*Performance directions*

Examiners hope that candidates will view this question as a musical task, not just a technical one. To this end they look to see whether the candidate has thought about an appropriate tempo for their piece and considered aspects such as dynamics, phrasing, articulation and bowing. These can go a long way to enhance the musical character of the piece and reveal whether there has been a musical sensibility behind creating the melodic lines and textures.

*An overview*

Teachers and candidates may like to refer to the following chart which summarises much of what examiners are looking for in this question:

	Weak	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	Strong
Harmonic fit	Little evidence of understanding the issue of harmonic fit		Less than half the test enjoys a good harmonic fit		Successful harmonic fit achieved for approximately half the question		Mostly secure harmonic fit, but more than one uncertain area		Confident harmonic fit throughout, perhaps a couple of strained moments	Convincing harmonic fit with tonally astute inflections
Melodic lines	Difficulty with writing melodies in general		Melodic ideas tend to meander, lack character and lack phrase structure		Some good melodic ideas, but control of contour / rhythm not always achieved		Good melodic shapes, though inconsistent in effect and success		Good melodic / rhythmic shapes creating a largely pleasing character	Strong melodic / rhythmic shapes creating convincing overall character
Texture	Persistent weaknesses in the texture throughout		Texture only intermittently successful; frequent issues between melodies and bass		Some success in approach to texture but relationship of melodies to bass frequently faulty		Mostly successful approach to texture but some issues in relationship of melodies to bass		Largely assured approach to texture with some interaction between lines	Convincing and varied approach to texture with strong interaction between lines
Performance directions	No performance directions at all		A few performance directions that seem rather random		Performance directions exist, but not appropriately applied		Performance directions are appropriate but inconsistent		Performance directions appropriately and consistently applied	Performance directions convey and enhance the inherent character



## Brief B

With more than half of all candidates choosing Brief B, the examiners saw a very wide range of compositions this year that explored many different idioms, levels of ambition, schemes of instrumentation and expressive intents. A general overview such as this report cannot, therefore, address each individual's approach. However, regardless of the idiom chosen, the scope of the ambition behind the composition, the instrumentation selected and the desired emotional content, success depends much more on addressing those aspects for which the examiners will give credit.

At the higher end of the mark scheme examiners are looking for qualities such as composition that is 'musically interesting and satisfying' or 'stimulating, inventive and imaginative'. These are not just abstract or subjective descriptions, but can be applied to all the various elements of music that the composer uses. Those looking to access high marks might light to focus on the way each element can be said to reflect these adjectives. In particular:

- **Melody:** Are your melodies characterful? Do they have a distinctive and memorable contour? Is there evident control of phrase structure? Are ideas (motifs possibly) developed and explored in creative ways?
- **Rhythm:** Is your choice of tempo well considered (i.e. not computer default)? Have you made good use of the inherent quality of your chosen metre(s)? Is there a sense of unity (and maybe also contrast) to the rhythmic patterns used throughout the piece? Is there something individual to the rhythm of the accompaniment?
- **Tonality and harmony:** Is there a clear sense of establishing a tonal centre? Does the piece involve modulation to other keys and is the scheme of tonal centres well planned? Does the harmonic palette bring a sense of colour to the music? Remember 'chromatic' means 'colour', but there are many ways of generating colour through harmony from simple techniques such as pedal notes to more elaborate ones like including added note chords.
- **Texture:** Has your approach to texture been creative or was it merely a by-product of the notes you chose? Have you explored register? Have you used rests to punctuate, vary and bring air to your textures? Does the main melodic line appear in different places within the texture or is it always found at the top?
- **Timbre:** Have you considered and made use of the range of sounds that your chosen instruments can produce? Have you utilised special playing techniques, and thought about the tone colour in different registers and at different dynamics? Are significant moments pointed by a particular use of timbre?
- **Structure:** If you have addressed a generous selection of the previous issues your music should have character and variety, but does it also have structure? Have changes in tonality, harmony, metre, rhythm, texture, register and timbre been well used to develop melodic ideas and to provide moments of distinct contrast? Are the resulting contrasting sections in good proportion? Is there a clear sense of beginning, middle and end?

In addition to the quality of the composer's ideas and the success with which they are explored, for which the recording is a strong guide, examiners also look to the written copy supplied – whether score or annotation – to consider how well the ideas are communicated visually. A well-edited score or a clearly set out and detailed annotation makes a deep impression on the examiner that the candidate is in command of the creative processes that led to the piece. It is a way for candidates to take ownership of their music and add to the aural impression that may be limited by an unmusical computer realisation, a technically deficient acoustic performance and /

or an amateur recording. Examiners would like to urge all candidates to give sufficient time to this aspect. Scores should show tempo, instrumentation, and performance directions; annotations should convey details of the structure, instrumentation and lyrics of a song, as well as information that helps the examiner to pinpoint significant melodic, rhythmic and harmonic content.

### **Brief C**

The set melody for Brief C this year contrasted quite strongly from the previous two years, for the first time being in 4/4 and also in a minor key.

With the melodic material provided, arranging offers the potential to imbue the given theme with a strong musical character, and many of the comments above regarding harmony, rhythm, texture and timbre are more than pertinent here, each having much potential for creating musical character. There was a strong character already inherent in the set melody: its dotted rhythm and rising melodic contour to start suggests a defiant mood with military overtones – something reinforced by the words.

Disappointingly not many Brief C candidates seized on this mood and enhanced it in their work. Martial snare drum patterns would have been appropriate, particularly perhaps in conjunction with a *pp* opening and a steady crescendo throughout to convey the approach of a defiant people.

Arrangements submitted displayed a fertile range of vocal and instrumental combinations and some were resourceful in exploring keys other than E minor for their work. A few tried an excursion to a major mode, though this proved a tricky path to bring off convincingly.

Sustaining interest for 3 minutes is a particular challenge in this Brief, and a good plan is required to achieve this successfully. It may be a thought-provoking exercise at the start to calculate how many bars will be required at one's preferred tempo and metre and then see how many verses will be required and how much need or potential there is for an introduction, interludes and coda.

The quality of the score or annotation is again as significant here as it is in Brief B (see above).

### **Administration**

Most centres are now used to the three-way division of the unit into its constituent Briefs and the manner in which this affects various stages of the administration. Candidates must be entered for one Brief only (MUS2A, MUS2B or MUS2C) but there were some instances of a single candidate being entered for two or even all three Briefs. It would be helpful if this could be remedied for next year: it may well be a case of catching your Examinations Officer at a quiet moment to have a chat!

There are still some centres that take an indulgent approach to presentation. Not only is this an unnecessary expense, it can slow the examiner in his / her work. Information about how work should be presented is provided in the Notes for Guidance (in the Teacher Resource bank on the AQA website), but the examiners would gently like to request that the following points are borne in mind:

- Scores and annotations should be on loose A4 pages enclosed in the Candidate Record Form. Staples can be a handicap; paperclips or treasury tags are preferable but usually not necessary.
- All candidates' scores or annotations should be named.

- All candidates' work should be put in order by candidate number and enclosed in the AQA sack provided.
- Please use a different sack for each Brief with its corresponding yellow label. These are quite likely to go to different examiners. The scripts for the different Briefs are kept separate for all subsequent processes and should not therefore be put in the same sack.
- Recordings can take the form of a compilation CD but there must be a separate CD for each Brief. So long as the order is logical, the CD well labelled and the track numbers written on the Candidate Record Form, long announcements are not necessary and only hold up the assessment.

### **Final comment**

The varied nature of Unit 2 has again been seen in this year's work. Many candidates are showing an encouraging level of understanding of compositional techniques in Brief A, whilst those choosing Brief B continue collectively to submit a dazzling array of creative work. Brief C, though less visited, is proving its value by providing a middle ground between the proscriptive techniques exercises and the open free composition route. That so much profitable and musical work has once again been achieved this year is due in no small part to the support, advice and encouragement that candidates receive from teachers. The examiners wish to express their gratitude for all this hard work to candidates and teachers alike.

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

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