



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

Music

MUSC2

(Specification 2270)

Unit 2: Composing: Creating Musical Ideas

Report on the Examination

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MUSC2 Creating Musical Ideas

Introduction

The range of options in Unit 2 continues to provide a stimulating breadth of work for examiners to consider and assess. For the examiner in this Unit, there is always the potential that the next script to be opened will be something quite different and full of interest and creative thinking.

Four years into the life of the current specification it seems as though the proportion of candidates for each of the three briefs has become settled: around half choose brief B, something over 40% do brief A, and a small group select brief C.

The submissions

Brief A

This year's paper followed the well-established pattern of two questions: the first a harmonisation exercise which tests awareness of tonality and modulations, ability to construct strong cadential patterns and skill at handling a four-part texture that exhibits good, musical part-writing and chord spacing; the second an exercise that requires ability to write characterful melodic lines and control textures whilst conforming to a given harmonic progression.

The vast majority of submissions in this brief are prepared with score-writing software; just a small number are written the old-fashioned way, either on manuscript paper or directly onto the Briefs paper. There are, clearly, some significant advantages to using the computer route when it comes to legibility, playback and making a recording; however, there are some potential disadvantages, too, for the unwary. The most significant of these is when candidates find themselves with an altered version of the question, either through miscopying the given material (in some cases, even omitting a complete bar) or through inadvertent alteration of the original through mouse mismanagement. The conscientious student would be well advised to check the final solution against the original copy in the Briefs paper before signing off their work.

Question 1: Harmonisation

After a triple time melody in last year's paper, this year's question reverted to 4/4 time. For the first time the Briefs paper provided a suggestion for how to harmonise the opening 2 bars. This had the advantage of highlighting the A minor tonality (there was also the G# in bar.2 of the tune to point this way). Use of the given opening was optional; probably a majority of candidates accepted the invitation, but many chose to make their own harmonisation for the first two bars. Some did so with success and imagination, making a strong first impression on the examiner; others were less successful, some even missing the pointers to A minor, beginning instead in C major. These candidates, whilst being admirably self-reliant, would have been better to use the suggested opening.

Tonality and Cadences

The close of the opening 4-bar phrase produced a wide variety of solutions. Some fixed on A minor as the key for the phrase and looked to end on an A minor chord. A plagal cadence provided a possible option (though a little unusual at this point), but those who tried a perfect cadence in A minor, using the penultimate melodic note of the phrase as the dominant 7th

note, fell foul of the unavoidable resulting resolution of this 7th in an upwards direction. Some found the more sophisticated solution of a Phrygian cadence in A minor (IVb → V) which was a strong choice. An alternative good option was to use the cadence as a first moment to move to the relative major by using a perfect cadence in C major.

The end of the second 4-bar phrase provided another conundrum. Many saw the falling melody at this point (F – E – D) as 3 – 2 – 1 in D minor, with many of these candidates taking the opportunity to write a standard Ic → V⁷ → I cadence at this point. Being bar 8 of a 16-bar melody, however, a more convincing option at this stage was an imperfect cadence in C major, a G major chord in b.8 sounding very confident as marking the halfway point.

Many handled the sequential bars 9-12 successfully in terms of spotting the implied tonal centres of A minor and E minor. However, cadences in bars 10 and 12 were not always well handled, the most common weakness being a lack of raised leading notes so that the harmony here took on a not altogether convincing modal character.

The last line provided few additional challenges in terms of grasping the tonality and the final cadence proved to be straightforward for most candidates. There was an option of using a tierce de Picardie at the end. This was not a simple matter of right or wrong in the examiners' eyes (and ears); more a case of creating a convincing overall harmonic progression. Those who used II⁷b → V⁷ → I where the antepenultimate chord takes an F natural (that is part of the harmonic A minor scale) made the final resolution to an A major chord particularly effective; a few used this progression with a F# as part of chord II (possibly from the melodic minor scale) which undermined the release of the major Picardy 3rd two beats later. Those who chose V⁴ → V³ → I often found a minor final tonic chord to be very satisfactory.

Harmony

This year's melody involved several examples of conjunct diatonic movement in the lower part of the scale, and this enabled resourceful candidates to make good use of progressions such as I → Vc → Ib, or I → VIIb → Ib (both progressions work well in reverse).

The sequential melody in the third quarter was sometimes treated as an exact harmonic sequence too, though some variation in harmonic progression was preferred here, if successfully managed.

Errors in this question tend to remain similar year to year and include:

- Harmonic vocabulary limited to primary triads
- An over-reliance on root position chords
- 2nd inversions used without a proper passing or cadential context
- Diminished chords that are presented in root position
- Chords that have unaccountable dissonances
- Chords that are missing the 3rd
- Chords that unconvincingly double the 3rd
- Unconvincing chord progressions, perhaps involving chord III or patterns such as V → IV
- Repetitive chord patterns

Good answers avoid these issues. Some candidates show an instinctive sense of harmonic direction, a good mix of inversions and chord choices, some chromatic inflection, and – above all – a strong bass line that complements the melodic line admirably.

Style

Inconsistencies and weaknesses in style arose from the standard issues again this year:

- Poor spacing of chords: the 4 parts need to be arranged in each chord so that there is either an approximate equality of gap between each part, or, if there is a large gap, it lies between the tenor and bass. The tendency that sometimes arises of having a large gap between alto and tenor probably comes from a lack of thinking to use leger lines or a tendency to think of two notes for each hand at the piano, and should be avoided. Good spacing is also an important aspect of instrumental solutions.
- Poor individual lines: it is important that each of the lines in the harmony has a good shape, and this can be undermined by excessive leaps and intervals such as augmented 2nds and augmented 4ths. Certain notes within a harmonic context have an inherent need to resolve in particular ways: 7ths and suspensions need to fall by step, the leading note will usually be best resolving upwards onto the tonic, etc. The recommended check for whether any line in the harmony is good is to try singing it: if this proves difficult, there may be a problem.
- Poor relationship between lines: parallel 5ths and octaves remain a significant weakness for many candidates. Particularly detrimental to a solution is when there are parallels between soprano and bass (in this instance, even if this is a perfect 5th moving to a diminished 5th, or vice versa). A particular place to double check is from the final chord of one phrase to the first chord of the next. In this year's question, many candidates finished bar 12 on a root position E minor chord, and then began the next line on a root position A minor chord, resulting in parallel octaves between soprano and bass, and often parallel 5ths between alto and bass to boot.

In order to keep the number of notes requiring harmonisation down, this year's tune included several bars with 2 minims in the melody. Stronger solutions found ways to maintain movement in these bars; those who wrote minims in all parts found the result somewhat static at these moments. It is, of course, important to make sure that any passing notes that are added in as a final embellishment do not produce new parallels between parts after an earlier checking has pronounced the work 'parallel-free'.

Question 2: Controlling texture

This year's question provided music in 2/2 time. This was often overlooked by candidates in the transcribing to their own copy, or at least not considered, and many a solution was submitted at the familiar default tempo of crotchet = 100 (or minim = 50) and so the opportunity for an elegant allegretto in duple time (perhaps with a pastoral feel given the key) was, in an instant, squandered. Instead many a solution was received that was heavily laden with semiquavers and other rhythmic elaboration that not only was unsympathetic to the inherent feel of the music provided, but involved writing many more notes (with the greater opportunity for errors in technique that this approach brings).

Harmonic fit

The overall impression gained by examiners is that more candidates are successfully following the harmonic basis provided for the question when writing their melodic lines. It is largely the case that passing notes in the bass are taken for what they are; there was less certainty when crotchet movement occurred in the right hand part of the accompaniment. Bar 18 was one moment that was not always well understood. The better solutions usually treated the first half of this bar as a root position B flat major chord (after all, the previous bar acts as the dominant 7th to this reading of the downbeat) with a subtle change to 1st inversion of G minor in the second half of the bar.

Errors in harmonic fit usually resulted when melodic lines were particularly florid and final quavers or semiquavers of a beat or bar could not be justified, being neither consonant nor explicable as passing or auxiliary notes. It was common for this to occur where one part, that was itself perfectly logical, was then doubled at the 3rd or 6th without care for such attention to detail regarding harmonic fit in the second part.

Care needs to be taken where melodies are being written to cover rests in the given accompaniment. In principle this is a good thing (those candidates who faithfully duplicate every rest into both melodic lines can expect to lose out), but there must still be a harmonic basis to the melodies that are written in such instances. Often this was not apparent.

Melodic lines

This aspect is often where candidates fall short in this question. Frequently melodic ideas are disappointing in at least one of the follow ways:

- Insufficient control of contour with either unremittingly conjunct motion, or haphazard leaps
- A lack of awareness of where the melodic contour naturally needs to go next, for instance the leading note usually needs to be satisfied by leading up to the tonic
- A lack of rhythmic interest with heavy dependency on one note value; a common sign is one bar of 16 semiquavers followed by one bar of 8 quavers...
- ...or a sudden, unidiomatic recourse to a bar of triplets (if the character of the piece is to include triplets, then make a feature of it)
- A failure to think in phrases with a sense of initiation and completion of each short phrase
- A limited melodic range in which all notes gravitate onto the staff; this is particularly unfortunate when the candidate has chosen an instrument such as the flute or violin that sounds especially attractive in the register above the staff
- Too much reliance on arpeggio / broken chord figuration

Careful consideration of the structure of the given material should help alleviate some of these issues. This year much of the question suggested 2-bar phrases, but many candidates seemed not to use this as a helpful structure to their melodic writing. Only a minority of candidates made good use of the sequence in bars 1-4 and the return to the opening idea at bar 9. Those who latched onto these features generally composed much more convincing solutions that had a sense of shape and direction. Those who thought of swapping over the roles of their two chosen instruments at these points, perhaps incorporating an octave transposition along the way, were often on the way to accessing a top bracket mark ('stimulating, inventive and imaginative').

Rhythm was often a weakness. Candidates would be well advised to think about starting a melody with a quaver rest to create an anacrusis feel. Very few seem to think of (or perhaps understand how to create on their software) a dotted rhythm; these are more likely to be idiomatic than triplets, and help in creating musical character.

Texture

The handling of texture is another common shortcoming for many candidates. In many cases both parts play the whole time without any rests (a particular concern where wind instruments are selected) and often with similar rhythmic activity, maybe a result of doubling lines at the 3rd or 6th. Alternatively some candidates chose to write 2 bars for just one instrument and the next 2 bars for just the other which soon becomes a case of writing a single melodic line shared between two instruments rather than a clear attempt to write the intended kinds of texture for which the examiners are looking.

Whilst some passages of sonorous 3rds are attractive, candidates are encouraged to write complementary lines as well as duplicating the character of one into the other. A good way some candidates find to do this is to write 2 bars with long note values in one part (minims and crotchets, perhaps even with a tie over the barline) and faster note values in the other (crotchets and quavers); this combination can then be used again in the next phrase with the roles reversed.

When it comes to texture, the examiners are considering the combination of the given bass part and the candidate's two melodic lines. Issues of concern include:

- Parallel 5ths and octaves involving any pair from these three lines
- Downbeats and other significant moments where this combination results in open 5ths (i.e. the 3rd of the harmony is absent), though this is not a problem at the start and end of the piece
- Places where one of the melodic lines goes beneath the given bass and thereby destabilises the texture and harmony

Editing the score

In this question candidates are encouraged to view the task as composing a piece of music rather than just completing a technical exercise. To this end, examiners expect to see staves clearly labelled with the chosen instrumentation, a tempo marking, some indication of the dynamics and articulation, and (where appropriate) bowing. In many cases at least one of these aspects is overlooked.

Occasionally a candidate errs in the opposite direction, and a score is overloaded with performance directions. Musical judgement should be the guide. Pizzicato is rarely appropriate in this idiom and will not gain additional credit unless there is a particularly imaginative effect from a specific moment – perhaps a final chord. The candidate who showed one flute minim to be played using a spread chord symbol, whilst resourceful in terms of accessing specific corners of notation software, was not showing musical judgement.

Brief B

Another fascinatingly diverse range of compositions were submitted to examiners for Brief B this year. The vast majority were presented as musical scores, whilst some took the form of annotations. Recordings were usually computer playback audio files – no less helpful for that – but some hugely entertaining acoustic performances also were submitted, especially in compositions that came under the 'vocal music' category.

At the top end, there are some highly impressive compositions in a wide range of idioms ranging from classical pastiche to Latin jazz and contemporary rock styles. Aspects that set apart top quality work include:

- A strong sense of structure in which contrast is well used to highlight and articulate form, and not just depending on repetition to extend a piece
- Attractive melodic ideas that generate more than a single phrase, and that can be developed during the piece
- A good grasp of tonal harmony with an ability to modulate
- The incorporation of a mix of chord inversions, and techniques such as pedal notes
- Exploration of some variety of harmonic rhythm
- An imaginative approach to texture (which can mean imaginatively simple) in which there is a clear role to each line in the musical fabric

- An interest in exploring register and not just having a melody in the treble and a bass line on the bass clef staff
- Use of a particular rhythmic idea to infuse each passage of the piece, and not just having a long line of crotchets or, at the other extreme, a confused mass of different note values
- Demonstration of an affinity for the musical character and timbre of each instrument used in the composition
- Well presented and detailed written material (score or annotation) to support the composition

At the top end, candidates show real ownership of their musical ideas and a sense of individuality that transcends an attempt to work within a generic style.

By contrast, work that is nearer to the opposite end of the mark range tends to exhibit several of the following characteristics:

- No clear structure, with little effective contrast in any element of music to articulate the course of the piece
- Rambling melodic material that lacks a clear character or sense of control over contour, rhythmic identity and structure
- A restricted harmonic palette that is heavily repetitive and likely only to use root position chords with a totally consistent harmonic rhythm (probably one chord per bar)
- A failure to modulate; where there is a change of key it is by juxtaposition rather than modulation
- A wholly diatonic approach to pitch which, nonetheless, might lack a strong sense of tonal focus
- A bland approach to rhythm with no useful mix of note values
- Only a mundane approach to texture with no variety or exploration of register (stavebound writing), and the melodic line always at the top; no creative use of rests; little differentiation of character between the different lines within the texture
- No particular insight into the character and potential of the instruments selected for the composition
- A playing time that is shorter than the required minimum (3 minutes) or one that only makes the required time through playing repeats
- Inadequate written material (score or annotation, though more typically the latter) to support the composition

Brief C

In previous years the set melody for Brief C has been homebred within the United Kingdom; this year – appropriately – Brief C went to the Caribbean in search of sun.

Unfortunately, the numbers choosing Brief C remain small, but the set melody inspired some splendid arrangements that had humour and verve. Some went as far as steel pans and scat singing, and many showed some appreciation of calypso and / or reggae. Latin American percussion in the form of bongos, congas, claves, maracas were used by some for some topical tropical colour.

One of the main challenges of this unit is to sustain interest sufficiently whilst fulfilling the 3 minute minimum time duration. Those whose method involved choosing a slow tempo tended to lose the inherent character of the melody with its infectious syncopated rhythms; this was rarely a successful path.

Those who fared well in this Brief were those who either had an accomplished grasp of an appropriate style with which to dress the melody – a Latin jazz idiom perhaps – or those who found more than one way to adapt the melody and thereby create, through contrast, a strong sense of structure. Such contrast tended to embrace changes of key, metre, and / or texture.

It may be worth reminding Brief C candidates that the examiners are looking for good and detailed written material as part of the submission, whether score or annotation.

Administration

Because there are discrete teams of examiners for each Brief, centres with candidates taking different Briefs are faced with the additional administrative hurdle of having to send separate Brief A, Brief B and Brief C parcels to different examiners. Most managed this admirably, and the examining team is grateful for the extra care and time taken in centres to achieve this.

It would be most helpful if each centre could check that each of their candidates at MUSC2 is entered for the correct brief. The blanket entry of candidates for all three Briefs (when, clearly, they are only going to submit work for one of them) is not helpful, creating many 'ghost' candidate entries.

Nearly all centres are well practised at preparing the material to be submitted, and the examining team appreciate all the care taken by teachers in this regard. Clarity and simplicity are the watchwords. Ideally the process should be:

- A score or annotation is printed on as few pages as makes for clear reading (reducing staff sizes as necessary).
- The Candidate Record Form is completed and folded around the score / annotation. There is no need for staples, treasury tags or plastic wallets, all of which can be a hindrance should AQA need to copy any of the material.
- The candidate's name is clearly stated on the score or annotation as well as on the Candidate Record Form
- Recordings for all candidates for a specific Brief are compiled on a single CD in candidate order. So long as the CD is clearly labelled and track numbers are cross-referenced into the corresponding box on the Candidate Record Form, no audio announcements are needed: these can just hold up the examiner.
- The process is repeated for other candidates who have taken an alternative Brief and separate parcels prepared with the appropriate address labels to enable tracking of parcels

Final comment

It has been very apparent to examiners this year that the MUSC2 specification, with its three alternative routes, is allowing talented young musicians of contrasting skills to produce very high quality work and access the top marks in each of the Briefs. It is hoped that these reflections written at the end of another busy exam season will help teachers guide their candidates to making the correct choice of Brief, and then make the most of their talents, avoiding some of the more common pitfalls.

The examiners pay tribute to the hard work that teachers across the country have again put in this year in preparing their students for this Unit; furthermore, the examiners are grateful for the time taken in making sure centre submissions are presented in as helpful way as possible for the examining process.

Mark Range and Award of Grades

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