

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2014

Pearson Edexcel GCE in Music
6MU02 Composing

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General Introduction

There was a small rise in the mean mark this year (from 41.3 to 42), attributable to an improvement in the standard of compositions (3% more candidates achieving better than half marks). However there was a fall in the standard of sleeve notes (5% fewer achieving better than half marks) and this arrested the year-on-year rise in the sleeve note marks that has characterised this unit in previous years.

There were some significant changes in the distribution and popularity of the briefs, with many more attempting Brief 4 this year and a fall in numbers opting for Brief 1, a brief that has, in previous years, proved the most popular.

Compositions

Overall, 90% gained better than half marks compared with 87% last year. Of these 63% were bunched in the 21-30 band. A typical submission consisted of a composition at 27 and a sleeve note at 15.

A common theme running through all the examiners' reports identified harmony as being the weakest of the various criteria with many candidates relying on narrow harmonic vocabularies, struggling to manage modulations convincingly and to manage a tonal scheme for their compositions when these features were appropriate to the composition.

There were few instances of brief infringements – when they occurred they involved composing for the 'wrong' forces or ignoring the structural requirements or contextual elements of the brief. Almost all pieces met the required 3 minute length.

Brief 1 – Rise of the machines – 37%

Surprisingly, this was not as popular as last year (when it was taken by 50% of the candidates). Compositions ranged from simple ostinato-based pieces to elaborate orchestral scores based on War of the Worlds. Perhaps it was the mechanistic, science fiction title that put some candidates off – there were arguably fewer obvious opportunities to explore well-known models of program music and to employ expressive harmony. Predictably, many candidates relied on rhythmic development to articulate the piece and many examiners chose rhythm as an optional criterion. Most candidates managed the basic requirement for a process in which the ideas built up, but some created highly elaborate scenarios and structures (including one in which a family was pursued round the house by a runaway washing machine).

Brief 2 – Variation structures – Taking and instrument for a walk - 30%

There was a very steep rise in numbers opting for this brief (up from 15% last year).

Many candidates achieved quite high marks for a creative set of variations and possibly chose this brief for that reason as this perhaps offered a more 'safe' and accessible task than last year's brief for a piece based on a motif. The result was 93% of candidates achieving better than half marks with 33% achieving marks in the top bands. Furthermore, the sleeve notes that were attached to pieces in this brief tended to be stronger as the episodic nature of the music made it easier to draw out points.

There were many interpretations of the walk. A journey through historical styles was a popular approach, as was a journey round the world featuring a range of world music styles.

Brief 3 – a song based on part, or all of, a story – 18%

There was a marked drop in popularity from last year's 32%. This brief has often tended to attract the weaker candidates and the figures suggest that this part of the cohort did better by choosing other briefs, helping to explain in part the overall rise in the composition marks.

It is possible that this proved a less attractive brief than in previous years because it suggested a narrative of some kind as opposed to being based upon a simple topic (like love or parting). Many candidates responded with music theatre songs involving dialogues between two or more singers although other very successful treatments drew on scenes, incidents and other cameos from stories.

Brief 4 – a vocal piece based on a festival – 15%

There was a significant rise in numbers opting for this brief over last year (when it was just 3%). Responses were generally very successful and this may explain further the rise in the composition marks since 95% achieved better than half marks. Most candidates provided an instrumental accompaniment and this, plus successful handling of more than one voice led to a gain in marks.

Sleeve Note

The questions remain the same each year and there has been a steady increase year-on-year for this part of the unit. In 2013 80% gained better than half marks (compared with 74% in 2012), This year, however, saw a drop with the figure falling to 69% .

Moreover, in 2013 50% gained better than 16/20 (compared with 35% in 2012) but in 2014 the figure fell to 28%.

One possible explanation is that in many cases candidates are now regularly gaining full marks for Questions 1 and 2 by providing very full answers that run onto additional pages and thus secure almost half marks for the sleeve note. However they seem to be leaving too little time for Question 3 that carries 12 marks. Also, a significant number of candidates appear to equate the 12 marks for this question with 12 points that have to be made. In fact, the mark scheme operates a sliding scale such that 17 points are required for full marks.

Many examiners commented on the length of the sleeve notes, some of which were excessively long, often running to seven typewritten pages, indeed one was reported to have been 3000 words in length. Centres are reminded that it is possible to achieve full marks using the space given in the question paper.

Administration

Some centres continue to submit their CDs in formats that are not playable on a standard hifi.

Several centres failed to send a signed authentication form. This is found on the last page of the question paper. A signed form is a requirement and so Pearson should be contacted if difficulties arise.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

<http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx>

