



Pearson

# Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2018

Pearson Edexcel GCE A Level  
In Music (9MU0)  
Paper 02 Composing

## **Edexcel and BTEC Qualifications**

Edexcel and BTEC qualifications are awarded by Pearson, the UK's largest awarding body. We provide a wide range of qualifications including academic, vocational, occupational and specific programmes for employers. For further information visit our qualifications websites at [www.edexcel.com](http://www.edexcel.com) or [www.btec.co.uk](http://www.btec.co.uk). Alternatively, you can get in touch with us using the details on our contact us page at [www.edexcel.com/contactus](http://www.edexcel.com/contactus).



## **Pearson: helping people progress, everywhere**

Pearson aspires to be the world's leading learning company. Our aim is to help everyone progress in their lives through education. We believe in every kind of learning, for all kinds of people, wherever they are in the world. We've been involved in education for over 150 years, and by working across 70 countries, in 100 languages, we have built an international reputation for our commitment to high standards and raising achievement through innovation in education. Find out more about how we can help you and your students at: [www.pearson.com/uk](http://www.pearson.com/uk)

Summer 2018

Publications Code xxxxxxxx\*

All the material in this publication is copyright

© Pearson Education Ltd 2018

## **General Introduction**

The standard of work submitted for this component was broadly as expected. It was encouraging to see the enthusiasm with which students approached their own briefs for the Free Compositions in particular, and that in the Briefs Assessing Technique the two 'new' options - Arrangement and Remix- were undertaken by an encouraging number of students.

## **Popularity of options**

Over half of students chose a completely free composition, for which they set their own audience and occasion. The two most popular options from the Pearson set briefs were the Instrumental Music and Film Music briefs, which amounted to around a quarter of submissions between them, while the other four options made up the remainder.

For the Briefs assessing technique the Bach Chorale option was attempted by the vast majority of students, while the Arrangement and Remix options established themselves with a small but solid base of students. There were a very small number of students who attempted the Two-part counterpoint option.

## **Composition 1 (Free or to a set brief)**

### **Importance of the Assessment Criteria**

A good understanding of the Assessment Criteria plays an important part in a successful submission. Students should be encouraged to consult the Assessment Criteria at all stages of their composing work, from planning through to final realisation.

### **Grid 1: Creating and developing musical ideas with coherence.**

This grid makes up 32.5% of the marks for Composition 1. This criteria assesses not only the overall coherence and shape of a piece, its fluency and variety, but also the shape, organisation and balance of individual sections, and to some extent, the bar to bar coherence of the music in terms of a sense of direction. Higher marks are available to those pieces that manage the balance of unity and variety carefully, whatever the musical structure chosen, and in which a sense of wholeness can be felt. The creation of, and development of, distinctive musical ideas is also key to success in this criteria.

Work scoring highly in this criteria showed many or all of these qualities, while less successful pieces were often excessively repetitive (perhaps relying too heavily on copy and paste techniques) or conversely incoherently over-diverse. The requirement is to write at least four minutes of music that shows coherence and some submissions did this admirably, while others struggled to sustain interest, coherence, or both for the required time.

An additional point to mention here is that, if the student chooses to write a set of short movements, for example a set of songs or a library of Film music cues, there is still an expectation that this will show coherence across the whole, as well as within the component parts. For this reason, it may be considered prudent for students to attempt continuous movements in most submissions, or to consider the use of strategies to create coherence across separate movements.

## **Grid 2: Creating and developing musical ideas with expressive control**

This criteria carries 35% of the marks and is an opportunity for the student's music to be rewarded for its artistic and emotional impact. This criteria rewards not only the effectiveness of the student's response to the brief but also their ability to use the musical elements to create and sustain moods and atmosphere in the service of the audience and occasion selected for the music. Students attempting the Pearson set briefs should note carefully the particular requirements of each – the Film Music brief, for example, required three contrasting scenes to be depicted (and indicated on the score), while the Fusions brief specified a particular minimum instrumentation. In both the examples above, there were students who failed to meet these requirements and consequently scored less highly in this criteria than those who had read and acted on the instructions in the brief. Students setting their own audience and occasion mostly made a good attempt at living up to their aspirations, but there were quite a few examples of very vague briefs indeed ('piece for a school concert') where it was difficult for examiners to find the focus required in the music to allow students to access the higher range of the Assessment Criteria. There were also examples of briefs which had clearly been written after the piece had been composed, and others which seemed to be describing a different piece than submitted.

## **Grid 3: Creating and developing musical ideas with Technical control.**

This criteria makes up 32.5% of the marks for Composition 1. This criteria covers the organisation of pitch, texture, tonality, sonority, tempo, rhythm and metre, dynamics, as well as use of stylistic conventions, instrumentation and control of texture. Here, examiners were required to take a 'best fit' approach to the marking, balancing strong features against weaker ones. Although students should always be encouraged to 'play to their strengths', the multi-faceted nature of this criteria means that obviously weaker features cannot be left intact in the hope that they will be ignored by examiners, as they will bring down the overall mark for this assessment criteria. In this context the most common weak areas were limited harmonic scope and control and weak melodic lines.

### **Recordings and scores**

The majority of submissions were accompanied by a printed score (although there were one or two instances of centres incorrectly sending PDF scores),

lead sheet, annotated screenshots or a written account of the composing process. Most of these were clear and their presence greatly helped the assessment process. Centres should be reminded of the suggested word limit for written accounts (contained in the specification) which, although not rigidly enforceable, is there to ensure that the focus is on the music produced, and not on the qualities of any written account. Use of conventional musical notation is a key requirement of the A Level music specification and, although the majority of students showed at least a fair degree of competence in its use, the incidence of missing expression marks and phrasing was still commonplace, incorrect clefs were often employed for some instruments, and there were several examples of incorrect rhythmic notation persisting for the majority of a piece. Similarly, those students choosing to submit sequencer screenshots should ensure that any text that needs to be read is large enough to be readable, once printed at A4 size!

Most recordings were clear and relatively well-balanced, and although the recording is not assessed in itself, it was always helpful to have a recording that gave a good idea of the composer's intentions. Sadly this was not always so, with examiners reporting some poorly balanced recordings where some parts were almost inaudible. (It is worth checking recordings made from Sibelius, for example, as very often the lower dynamics can be almost inaudible if not 'tweaked' a little. ) Most submissions were in a correct and readable format, (WAV/AIFF/MP3) and the move to allow USB as well as CDs seems to have been generally successful.

## **Free compositions.**

The majority of compositions were to briefs provided by the students themselves. On the whole, this produced an increase in the imaginative qualities of the work submitted, as the students' creativity blossomed with the freedom to pursue their own interests and enthusiasms. Many of these free compositions were connected either to the set briefs, or to Areas of study or the set works within them. The freedom for example, to write a short film score, but without the constraints of the set brief, was embraced by many students, and, although the world of 'Pirates of the Caribbean' and 'Batman' was never far away, many of these pieces showed sound melodic and harmonic qualities, as well as an encouraging ambition in the handling of large orchestral forces. Some students offering these 'bespoke' film scores would benefit from including brief outlines of the action depicted, either on the score itself, or in a short written paragraph. However, as mentioned above, when the audience and occasion was less focused the free compositions could often be less focused in themselves, lacking direction and effectiveness in their response to the brief in particular. At times, students chose forms and structures that they were either insufficiently familiar with, or for which they could not articulate the structure or provide suitable content.

## **Set brief compositions**

### **Brief 1 -Vocal Music**

This option was attempted by few students, but was relatively successfully undertaken. There was at least one instance of a student losing marks by omitting any form of accompaniment, and several where there was no discernible contrasting section, chorus or interlude: both of these brief conditions needed to have been met. The style of vocal writing ranged widely, from the popular to the choral and everything in between, and an encouragingly wide range of texts were set- some very sensitively indeed.

### **Brief 2 – Instrumental Music**

This was the second most popular option among the set briefs. The task here was two-fold: to create and articulate a successful Ritornello structure and to create a viable concerto movement to show off a young performer. Predictably, the better students fulfilled both objectives, some only one, and the poorer ones, neither. The most common shortcomings were rather limited instrumental writing in Solo or accompanying parts (or both), or Ritornelli that came back, completely unaltered (same key, same instrumentation, same length...). Some students did show a good command of Baroque and Classical stylistic conventions, although there were several instances of someone not knowing when to finish a melodic sequence!

### **Brief 3 – Film Music**

This was the most popular of the set briefs, with much good work in evidence here. The most successful students combined a keen sense of location (often 'Eastern' or Latin-American) with a strong stylistic sense reminiscent of Bond scores. Additionally, the most successful scores flowed seamlessly from one scene to another, using a variety of musical devices to effect a change of scene/mood. Less successful pieces often contained insufficient contrast, perhaps lacked focus, or simply did not flow: although sections can end definitely in Film Music, too many 'stops' do destroy continuity and make the piece sound like a medley of unconnected ideas.

### **Brief 4 – Popular Music and Jazz**

This was attempted by only a small number of students but was quite successfully done, with some students showing not only a good command of the stylistic qualities of Soul, but also the ability to write idiomatically for the voices and instruments chosen.

### **Brief 5 – Fusions**

Again this option attracted only a small number of students, most of whom had done their research and produced compositions that showed a sound understanding of the musical structures and conventions of Gamelan music. There were one or two outstanding submissions in this category, one of which combined a Gamelan soundworld of Piano and tuned percussion with an Avant garde contemporary style to produce a challenging but intense musical experience.

### **Brief 6 – New Directions**

This attracted a small proportion of students, and was generally well attempted, with some excellent submissions obviously based on the 'Rite of Spring'. There were also some less successful submissions where an all-purpose Film music style had been attempted, with only moderate success. Again, the point should be made that the brief here required three contrasting

sections and some kind of exploration of twentieth-century harmonic idioms: not all students seemed to have taken all of this on board.

### **Briefs assessing technique**

In this part of the component students could choose to spend their six hours working on a 'traditional' technical composition - Bach Chorales or Two-part counterpoint - or on an Arrangement or a Remix. Despite the wide range of styles here, three quarters of the marks came from three common assessment grids, with the fourth being individual to each option. The total mark here was out of 20, meaning that this component contributes a third of the marks in this component. In addition to the published Assessment Criteria for these briefs, students and centres are encouraged to consult the document 'Guidance Notes on Briefs Assessing Technique', available on the Pearson A Level Music website.

### **Bach Chorales**

This was by far the most popular option, being attempted by over three-quarters of students. The two Chorales set contained a selection of common melodic shapes found in J.S. Bach's Chorale output and students will have encountered many of them in their preparations for this paper. Many students showed a secure command of harmony in both major and minor keys, and most designed a broadly successful tonal strategy, with appropriate modulations. Good and very good students included a judicious mixture of root and first inversion chords, some secondary chords and perhaps some chromaticism. In general the cadences were better completed than the material on their approach, although too many students still failed to choose the correct progression underneath the auxiliary at bar 5, beat 3, where a IIb7 chord will always create parallels. Similarly, the F quaver on the second beat of chorale 2 cannot be treated as a passing note or auxiliary, as it leaps, and so any chord not including an F at this point was incorrect. Other common problems of chord choice included exposed 5ths or octaves when the Soprano part leapt (on six occasions), inappropriate use of second inversion chords, diminished chords used in root position, and the omission of accidentals, particularly in the minor key chorale. Some weaker students failed to provide two chords underneath the minims in bars 7 and 14 in Chorale 1 and in bars 4 and 12 in Chorale 2.

Many students had obviously studied the main features of Bach's Chorale style and there were many attempts to maintain a flowing polyphony by the use of quaver movement in all parts. Although some of this quaver movement was successful, often it caused parallels and so was counter-productive. Many students took opportunities to treat the leading note stylistically at cadence points, and the stronger submissions also included appropriate suspensions in both inner and bass parts. Many students also created a suitable texture, with a high tenor tessitura with the largest intervals between Tenor and bass parts.

Part-writing remains a weak area for many students, the most disheartening possibly being the large number of parallels in some students' work between Bass and Soprano, which not only indicates poor part-writing, but also a poor

choice of harmony. Overlaps, doubling of the leading note, part-crossing and poor dissonance treatment were also common problems here, as well as the tendency to create exposed 5ths and octaves when the Soprano part leaps. Some weaker submissions omitted the third of the chord and one or two even saw fit to change the given Soprano line. With the addition of 'given' material mid-Chorale in this specification, students need to ensure that the links into and out of such material do not cause part-writing problems – there were some examples of these checks not having been made.

Many students obviously understood the importance of a flowing Bass line, with some contrary motion in relation to the Soprano, and there were also some flowing and 'singable' Alto and Tenor lines. Weaker Bass lines often lacked shape, moving either by small intervals rather shapelessly, or with larger leaps, creating an angular feel. Inner parts occasionally contained rather static or 'oscillating' shapes, while in the minor key chorale, there were many examples of rising augmented seconds or fourths.

### **Two-part counterpoint**

There were very few attempts at this option with an even spread of marks across the range. The stronger students showed a good sense of harmonic and tonal movement, allied with stylish melodic lines which had shape and direction. Some weaker students showed little regard for the relationship between the two parts – the basic rules of part-writing apply here, as well as in Bach Chorales!

### **Arrangement**

This option was attempted by a small but significant number of students. Some successful pieces treated the given theme as the subject of a mini Theme and Variations, while others chose to present it in a new style, the most popular being a Jazz treatment. Some imaginative harmonies were evident in some submissions, while different melodic devices were employed in others, and some exciting treatments of rhythm were also attempted. Some submissions had a strong sense of style, and, although some were quite short, most pieces adopted a broadly stable structure, which was often sectional. Weaker submissions showed less sense of style, and a lack of direction with too little or too much contrast. Most students used three instruments, as specified in the brief, although there was at least one example which used voices, and lost marks in consequence. Stronger submissions managed the instruments and textures capably, sharing material around the parts and providing worthwhile challenges for each player, while weaker students often failed to move the given melody out of the octave around middle 'C', wrote rather functional lines, or perhaps even those that were ineffective (low Piano LH hand chords) or even unplayable. Stronger students transformed the given melody into something different, but still essentially recognisable, by a variety of methods. Weaker students often simply stated the given melody several times, virtually unchanged, perhaps with slightly varying accompaniments and harmonies.

### **Remix**

This is the only option not to require a score, although many students did include written accounts or screenshots, most of which were useful. There were many strong submissions for this option, with many students showing considerable skills in the use of music technology.



Many students created a viable harmonic backing to the vocal sample, most choosing Bb major, but there were also a few successful examples of students making the piece work in a modal G minor. Rhythmic features were very important here, and many students created a successful dance style, which varied from 'standard' house and techno treatments to those with more 'exotic' components, such as Reggae or Samba. Some students created Bass lines which worked well with the drum and rhythm parts, and also wrote stylish and effective inner parts and counter-melodies.

A strong sense of style was often present in stronger submissions here, as was a suitable structure, whether or not it included the seemingly compulsory breakdown section. Some weaker students struggled to establish a style here while others found any kind of balance between unity and variety very difficult to achieve, often producing over-repetitive results.

The use of music technology was central to this task, and many students had used technology not only to produce a clear, balanced recording, but also as a creative tool to enhance the end product. In this respect there were many skilled uses of effects, signal processing and digital editing, as well as much creativity in the choice of appropriate timbres, synthesised, sampled and occasionally live. Weaker students sometimes tried conceal a lack of content behind over-use of effects in particular, but these efforts were often self-defeating.

The best submissions often transformed the given vocal sample radically, re-ordering and editing it, transposing, playing it against itself, and changing it in many other ways. Weaker submissions sometimes left the original sample virtually unaltered, or perhaps failed to synchronise it with the added accompaniment. Although most submissions had been created using sequencing technology, there were one or two examples of performances where the sample had been accompanied by 'live' musicians, although sometimes these were little more than a loose improvisation behind the vocals.

## **Underlength and incomplete submissions**

It is very sad to report that there were some students whose submissions failed to meet the minimum time requirement for the component of 6 minutes, and who therefore scored 0 marks for the entire component. The consequences of underlength submissions were well-telegraphed in the specification and were prominent in the brief documents for both Compositions and the Briefs assessing technique. Any candidate's work under the 6 minute minimum was referred to the Team Leader or Principal Examiner for double checking, and every effort was made to allow the work to reach the minimum requirement. It should be noted that the allowed lengths for the Bach Chorales and Two-part counterpoint were fixed at 2 minutes 10 seconds and 2 minutes 40 seconds respectively, and that these timings could not be changed, even if the candidate's own recording of either was slower and therefore lasted a few more seconds. Sometimes more music has to be produced, but sometimes a simple alteration to the metronome mark in the recorded performance can produce the vital few seconds which gets the submission over the 6 minute mark. Similarly, students need also to observe the stated minimum durations for the two individual components: the

compositions must be 4 minutes long, and the Arrangement or Remix must be at least one minute in length. Failure to reach these individual minimums resulted in a mark of 0 for only the affected part of the submission, if the whole submission still exceeded 6 minutes.

There were also a few examples where students had left significant sections of either the Chorale or Two-part counterpoint options incomplete. In such cases examiners were instructed to mark as if the missing sections were incorrect.

## **Administration**

For the first sitting of this specification, with many demands, both technical and administrative, there were less real problems than perhaps were anticipated. For sure, there were CAS forms left unsigned (or printed from a very early version of the specification), some missing or broken CDs, missing scores etc, but in general the correct submissions arrived, on time, with the correct examiner in order to allow assessment to take place. There were some CDs that were rather inadequately labelled (especially if the students' pieces were not announced on the recording either); some USBs not labelled (they are also very small, so some kind of 'container' is useful). Some centres need to be very careful about using the acceptable recording file formats (WAV/AIFF/MP3) while others sent Sibelius or MIDI files instead of audio files. It might be also useful to remind students submitting Chorales or Two-part counterpoint on separate printed sheets to label these carefully with candidate information, as those without would be impossible to identify if separated from the main body of the submission.