General Certificate of Secondary Education
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Music   42702

(Specification 4270)

Unit 2:Composing and Appraising Music

Report on the Examination

42702 Composing and Appraising

This year saw the first full cohort of Year 11 candidates entering for this new unit. Unit 2 is worth 20% of the overall GCSE, with 10% for the composition and 10% for the appraisal. Up to 20 hours of supervised time are available for the completion of the composition and there are then up to two hours of Controlled Time for the formal writing up of the appraisal document.

Composition

Candidates need to select at least two Areas of Study (AoS) which will feature prominently in their composition. They must also select a link to, or focus within, the current Strand of Learning which for 2011 was The Western Classical Tradition. There were a few examples of situations where centres had not realised this and had either given candidates one of the other strands to use or had simply given them a free choice as to which of the three strands to work within.

Choosing the Areas of Study and the link to the Western Classical Tradition

Any combination of AoS can be made and by far the most popular this year included AoS5 Structure & Form. In many ways, this is an eminently sensible choice, as candidates will then be thinking immediately in terms of the form / structure of their composition. A recognisable form / structure is one of the main characteristics which enables a piece to sound whole and satisfying. The choice of the second (or additional) AoS should really be down to the strengths of individual candidates and the nature of their composition. It was rather disappointing to see, in several centres, that all or virtually all candidates had selected the same pair of AoS and had all used the same link to the strand.

It was also disappointing to see that nearly all centres seemed to be advising their candidates that they had to write a piece in the style of the Western Classical Tradition or use instruments associated with the Western Classical Tradition. This was **not** the case: for example a piece can be linked via Ternary form but can be for any combination of instruments and / or voices.

Where there was a common link set by the centre, this was frequently rondo form, a waltz, ternary form, theme and variations or a ground bass. In many cases, this resulted in fairly formulaic pieces which tended to lack individual flair; often it also resulted in candidates writing, within their appraisals, that they had used instruments they really knew little or nothing about but had been directed to choose as they were seen as fitting in with the strand (usually string instruments and / or a piano.)

Where such an approach was used, compositions and their associated appraisals followed the same patterns and there was rarely any room for true originality. This also meant that marks awarded tended to be within a fairly narrow range, as the same guidelines had been given to all, for example:

- chord pattern
- choice of key
- choice of modulation
- form
- resources

The whole point of the link / focus is that, once it has been established, the music can then be written in a style of the candidate's choosing. It is quite in order to compose a 'pop' song having chosen rondo form or strophic form; a ground bass can be for any combination of instruments, including guitars, a brass quartet, two melody instruments plus piano and so on. Additionally, a composition might just focus on the use of different tonalities or on contrasting timbres. In short, any style of composition can be written for suitable resources.

When asked for the 'Focus **within** the strand' on the *Candidate Record Form*, too many candidates – usually throughout an entire centre – simply wrote 'The Western Classical Tradition': this is not an adequate answer. At the other extreme, some thought they had to identify a link from **each** element within **each** chosen AoS, often naming a different link altogether within their appraisal. Other rather vague responses included 'a classical instrument' or 'a classical structure' without giving any further information.

The vast majority of candidates chose two AoS, as required. Quite a few chose three and there were examples where four or even all five were chosen. Candidates must be sure that their composition does indeed exemplify the elements of music contained within these AoS and not simply think there is some sort of 'hidden advantage' to be gained by selecting more than the minimum number of AoS.

There were many examples where a candidate stated that their music was in 'Ternary form' but wrote a piece which was obviously A B A C, or described this form as 'Rondo'. Often pieces described by candidates as a 'Ground Bass' were, in fact, written over a repeating chord sequence – and all too often this was I VI IV V – rather than a repeated bass line. And where the chord sequence **was** repeated, the bass line was varied throughout, thus removing any similarity with 'ground bass.' Again, this misunderstanding tended to occur as a pattern within a whole centre.

Many candidates said that their piece was in Sonata form and correctly named the three main sections as Exposition, Development and Recapitulation but then wrote a piece simply in Ternary Form, with a contrasting middle section containing no development of the musical ideas within the 'A' section. In a few cases, candidates identified two AoS on their *Candidate Record Form*, a different two on the front of their Appraisal Booklet and yet another combination of two within their appraisal: this led to understandable confusion for the examiner. On the other hand, there were many examples of centres which enabled their candidates to choose suitable AoS to reflect their strengths and to decide on a focus / link which was simple and relevant both to the AoS and the candidate's experiences.
Many wrote for instruments they could play or for ensembles of which they had experience and this was, of course, beneficial, as the instruments and their capabilities were understood and used idiomatically.

Examples of possible combinations of AoS and links to The Western Classical Tradition could be:

AoS1 Rhythm & Metre plus AoS5 Structure & Form with a link to the use of *contrasting time signatures.* Within this field, candidates could write for pitched instruments, unpitched instruments or a combination of both.

AoS 3 Texture & Melody plus AoS4 Timbre & Dynamics with a link to a *concerto-style* of composition: in such a piece, different timbres could be combined in different textures with judicious use of contrasting dynamics or crescendo / diminuendo and recognisable and memorable melodies.
A candidate might feel that their composition represents three AoS and *identify AoS2 Harmony & Tonality, AoS3 Texture & Melody and AoS5 Structure & Form* and compose a

song for resources with which they are familiar. The song could be strophic, could alternate verse and chorus, be through composed or utilise a version of the 'popular song' form of an introduction, verses, chorus, bridge, *Middle 8*, and an outro. The simpler versions would have repetitive rhythms and a short chord sequence for the verse and / or chorus. Writing for instruments would show some understanding of their possibilities but there might be some limitations in how they are used or how musical ideas are presented and developed. Better compositions would include a wider range of harmonies, a strong, recognisable 'hook' in the chorus, idiomatic writing for instruments with perhaps an instrumental section and / or an instrumental countermelody. There might be a change of key for the final chorus. The best compositions might even include backing vocals and more adventurous harmonies, including the use of seventh chords.

To sum up, the aim of this unit is that candidates choose (for themselves) at least two AoS and then decide on a link to the strand for that year, aiming to compose in a style which they find relevant, for resources they can handle with confidence and thus have the greatest chance of being successful.

The composition process

Whatever is chosen, it is vital that all elements of the composition process are transparent to the examiner: it must be obvious exactly what the candidate's own, original musical input has been and where there has been specific help from others: this help might take the form of direction as to chord choices, melodic shapes, realisation of chord patterns within a pop-style group, the addition of a bass line from a given chord sequence to the full realisation of an accompaniment from simple chord indications. Each of these was encountered and, unless there is direct evidence from the candidate, preferably within the appraisal and / or on the *Candidate Record Form*, it poses real problems for the examiner who must then take steps to obtain clarification.

Assessment criteria

Prior to working on their compositions, it is essential that candidates are aware of the assessment criteria and that they pay particular attention to the descriptors. For example, to access the higher marks bands, compositions must be capable of matching the descriptors found there. Thus, to gain a mark in the 20–17 band, a composition will need to be stimulating, interesting and satisfying, having a sense of completeness with evidence of development of musical ideas. There will be a successful and imaginative creation of ideas in relation to the chosen AoS and the focus within the strand. There will be idiomatic writing for the chosen instruments, voices and/or sound sources and the submitted score will contain performance directions appropriate to the genre of music chosen.

Compositions awarded marks in the 16 – 13 band will be 'largely satisfying'. There will be evidence of imaginative writing and clear understanding of the musical ideas inherent within the chosen AoS and link. The piece will **work**, that is there will be a sense of 'wholeness' with evidence of some development of the musical ideas, rather than just repetition. The candidate will have shown understanding of how to write for the instruments and voices selected: they will not restrict their music to a limited range; they will show awareness of the different techniques that can be used, for example 'arco' and 'pizzicato' for string instruments, use of the sustaining pedal for the piano, the range of notes available on the chosen instruments, the appropriate vocal range for the chosen singer.

Due attention must also be paid to the *Musical Aspects* set out in the assessment criteria in the specification. These are:

- the imaginative use of sound
- a sense of musical balance
- the creation and development of musical ideas
- an understanding of the chosen medium
- the appropriate and idiomatic use of instruments, voices and other sound sources
- appropriate uses of musical elements, devices, techniques and conventions

Scores and recordings

For all compositions, a score and a recording must be submitted. The score can take any format best suited to the candidate's abilities and the style of composition. What is absolutely essential, however, is that the score, in combination with the recording and the other information submitted, both on the Candidate Record Form and in the appraisal, allows the examiner to understand fully the final intentions of the candidate and the extent to which the composition as submitted is his or her own unaided work.

Traditionally-notated scores should include all relevant performance details. Where a candidate chooses to include screen shots, these need to be annotated to give as much information as possible regarding tempo, phrasing, dynamics, articulation, and so on. The better submissions in this category included a detailed annotation with timings and / or details of the main events to listen for, thus enabling the examiner to follow the recording easily.

On too many occasions, insufficient information was given, even when also taking into account the information within the appraisal. In some cases, 'scores' consisted of song lyrics only or a simple chord sequence, often not linked to any lyrics or form; sometimes a guitar composition might consist of merely a few bars of handwritten 'tab' score with no indications as to how the music is to be played in terms of either form or expressive / performance detail. Without detailed information, the examiner will not be able to assess the composition unless further information is obtained, thus delaying the whole process.

During the composition process, the score will be revised and, often, different versions will have been saved, especially if a computer has been used. It is vital that it is the score for the **final version** of the composition which is submitted and that it clearly matches the recording.

Where Cubase (or Logic) is used as the composing tool, it is important that the score is quantised as well as possible.

In the majority of cases, recordings were of good quality with only very few which would either play through a computer only or not play at all.

Appraisal

Six questions are given on the inside cover of the appraisal booklet and, in the majority of cases, candidates simply worked through these in turn. This had the double advantage of, first, ensuring that they covered all the areas and, second, giving their appraisal a clear and logical format.

When candidates are preparing their appraisal responses, they should be encouraged to keep a log or diary of progress. Perhaps the six questions could be set out as a workbook

and, as the composition progresses, comments could be added. Centres and candidates need to remember that the Appraisal is worth 50% of the marks for this unit and, as such, deserves careful preparation. However, this should not mean that candidates look for quantity above quality: sufficient valid points to access marks in the top band can easily be gained without filling the appraisal booklet.

Practice varied from centre to centre as to whether these were handwritten or word processed, whether they were short or long, whether there were extra pages attached or not, whether candidates addressed all the questions or not. The shortest examples were one side of a page or less, while it was very hard to appreciate how some of the very long ones could actually have been written from prepared notes within the two hours of controlled time allowed. It should be emphasised that there is no requirement, or credit for writing a review of the recorded performance: this happened in a minority of centres and, in some cases, meant that candidates did not have time to deal with the main questions in sufficient detail. A breakdown, often in minute detail, of what went wrong in the recording as submitted does not belong under 'how the final recording was achieved' or 'difficulties encountered during the task'.

The questions

The **first** question is quite straightforward: it asks candidates to state the AoS chosen and identify the focus within / link to the strand. The **second** question asks them to explain their choices. Many candidates tackled these questions simultaneously, as in "I chose AoS1 Rhythm & Metre as my first AoS because . . ." This is quite acceptable and, in many cases, led to some detailed responses. Problems sometimes arose because the candidate had chosen just one element within an AoS, for example referring to AoS4 as Dynamics, or because the candidate wrote about one element but then forgot to write about the other, or, indeed, any others. The same problem could be found within answers to question 5.

The **third** question was really in two parts: first, it asked for details of the 'process of composition': this concerns how the piece evolved. Many candidates simply saw this as having to write an annotation / a description of the finished work, rather than an explanation of how the different parts of the piece grew. In too many cases, candidates wrote in generalities:

- "I came up with a chord pattern"
- "I had a good idea for a tune"
- "I decided that my piece had to be in a major key", even
- "I wrote my piece in C major"

without giving any details of the process or reasons for the choice.

The better candidates wrote at great length about the gestation of their music, though often in fairly general terms. Those that gained the highest marks gave specific information on matters such as

- precise chord progressions
- the steps by which a melody was evolved
- the process of deciding on accompaniment styles / patterns
- the steps taken to ensure there was contrast between sections where this was required
- steps taken to ensure the whole piece sounded 'finished'
- consideration of instrumental techniques and their application.

The second part of the third question asked candidates to give details as to how the piece was recorded. Too often, the response was a simple: "As my composition was done on a computer, the recording was taken straight from there." This may have been the case, but in all cases decisions had to be taken about expressive and performance directions and included in the score, or at least programmed into the software. There should, ideally, be a tempo indication, dynamics and dynamic shading, phrasing, consideration as to balance, articulation, and so on. Where a recording was done 'live', candidates were able to write about matters of microphone placement, rehearsals and balance.

To restate what was written in last year's report:

When writing about the process of gaining the recording, candidates should make sure that their role in this is clearly identified:

- where a recording is obtained directly from a computer software program such as *Sibelius*, it is most likely that the candidate will have inputted all the notation and added the performance detail, but this needs to be stated
- where a candidate has used a more performance-linked program such as *Cubase* or *Garageband*, it should be clarified how the tracks were entered, be it step-time, real-time, by the candidate or by other musicians
- where a performance is achieved by acoustic means, it is important to know whether or not the candidate is involved in the performance and his/her precise role, both in the actual performance and in directing any other performers. This is particularly important when an annotation is submitted to accompany the recording.

Question **four** required details of problems encountered and how they were overcome. Too many of these were either about technical matters, including computer problems, or running out of time to complete the piece. Most of the candidates who wrote this had produced very short compositions. Too few dealt with problems of a compositional nature although, to be fair, some of these had been covered (and could be credited) within the first part of the response to question three. If composition was mentioned, it was often along the lines of "I got stuck for what to do next", with the solution often being that the teacher or peers were asked for ideas or that "I eventually thought of a new idea." As regards the solutions, there were too many answers which summed things up with something along the lines of " . . but I sorted it out eventually."

An evaluation of the success of the final piece in terms of the chosen AoS and focus was required in answer to question **five**. Responses here were usually either good or poor, with nothing really in between. Basically, it is a matter of identifying sections within the compositions which demonstrate good use of the elements within the AoS and show appropriate use of the focus rather than merely pointing out that the piece was well received.

Not many candidates understood the 'Context' question **(six).** Having chosen two (or more) AoS and a focus within the strand, the candidate has established the context of their composition. It will, therefore, be unique to each candidate but will also tend to fall within a recognisable style or genre of music. Candidates will have listened to various pieces when preparing for their own composition and, really, this question is about assessing the extent to which their composition matched up to these exemplar pieces.

As an example, a candidate might have chosen AoS4 Timbre & Dynamics, and AoS5 Structure & Form with a focus of Rondo form. In this case, the candidate would have listened to movements in this form by different composers and would have noted, with a specific view to their own impending composition, how the composers used timbre, how they contrasted dynamics, and how they ensured that the different sections of the form were clearly delineated aurally. This might include changes of timbre, of key, of register, of dynamic, even

of tempo. Discussion could then ensue as to how the candidate's own piece reflected these contextual characteristics. This would form the basis of the answer to question six.

Approaches to the Appraisal

Where a centre had adopted a set approach to the composition, for example all candidates chose the same two AoS and link, so their appraisals tended to be similarly formulaic, with phrases, sentences, even paragraphs being repeated in different appraisals. This inevitably led to a lack of specific reference to the candidate's own composition and, therefore, fairly bland responses. In some cases, it resulted in actual errors within an appraisal. Where all candidates had written a 'Theme and variations', it might have been the case that the intention had been to compose **three** variations. However, in those instances where a candidate actually wrote **two** or **four**, there would still be a reference to "my three variations." In a very few cases, candidates had obviously started one composition but had subsequently abandoned it and written a new one. Some appraisals then had references to both, perhaps with a long explanation of the process of starting the composition, getting stuck with it, abandoning it and restarting or showing actual confusion as to what the final composition was: references to instruments which might well have been in the first piece but certainly weren't in the one submitted, references to a style of music which might well have been the basis of the initial focus but was later replaced by whatever became the submitted piece. In such cases, it was not unusual for the accompanying score to contain staves for instruments which were never used.

Some appraisals were in real need of judicious editing, as they tended to be repetitive and / or vague. Overall, as one might expect, weaker candidates tended to write in very general terms while the better candidates linked their comments to their own composition, the very best giving specific bar numbers. There were one or two instances where a centre had given either adapted versions of the appraisal questions to their candidates or seemed to have made up their own: both approaches obviously disadvantaged the candidates, who were unable to respond with the required information.

Centres are reminded that it is not envisaged that candidates should write more than will easily fit into the Appraisal Booklet and, if translated to a word-processed document, this would probably be of no more than two to three sides of A4. However, it is unlikely that just a few sentences will be capable of covering the issues in sufficient detail to enable the candidate to access the higher mark bands. Overall, spelling, punctuation and grammar were not serious problems, though handwriting was, at times.

When writing their appraisals in controlled time, candidates may use the final version of their score and any notes they have made during the process of composing and preparing the final recording, Candidates may **not** use a pre-written appraisal, as this would not constitute 'notes'. Nor is it acceptable to copy and paste from pre-written word-processed notes into a word-processed appraisal. If candidates have already word-processed detailed notes then they should hand-write their appraisals. Ultimately the teacher has to authenticate the work as the candidate's own and as having been completed in accordance with the requirements.

Administration

There were examples of both excessive and inadequate packaging this year: some packages arrived within boxes which were themselves so well sealed it took quite a major and prolonged assault to penetrate them. At the other extreme were envelopes with unsecured CDs where the cases had been badly damaged during transit.

Not all centres remembered to include a copy of the Attendance List: there were occasions when this was essential as the contents of the package did not match the number of

candidates expected. Contact had to be made with the centre to establish whether this was an omission of work or a candidate absence. However, there were also examples where a candidate was marked present on the Attendance Form, no work was enclosed and the Attendance List was subsequently shown to have been completed incorrectly: another source of delay for examiners.

It is not necessary to make announcements on the CD: a simple list of contents will suffice. However, it is always vital that the CD track number is inserted on the *Candidate Record Form*.

Not all *Candidate Record Forms* contained both signatures, not all candidates completed the box indicating whether or not help had been received, and quite a few failed to indicate, on the reverse of the form, which AoS had been chosen and what the focus was within the strand. There were also occasions where two versions of the recording were submitted, one via *Sibelius* or some other software program and the other live. This is not necessary and the candidate, in consultation with the teacher, should decide which one to submit.

There were instances where parts of a candidate's submission were missing, sometimes the appraisal, sometimes the recording, sometimes the score. In all cases, contact with the centre led to speedy rectification of the omission. Where the appraisal had been word processed, the Appraisal Booklet was sometimes not included; although the entire booklet is not needed in such cases, the examiner needs at least the front cover: on this is the candidate's information, the identification of the two AoS and the space wherein the examiner puts the mark awarded.

Overall, there were many examples of good practice this year and, as centres realise the practicalities of writing a piece where their candidates can focus on at least two Areas of Study and have free rein to choose a meaningful and relevant link to / focus within the strand, the opportunities are there for improvements in several areas.

The Strand of Learning for 2012 will be 'Popular Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries' and in 2013 it will be 'World Music'. Thereafter, the three strands will rotate in the same order. Further help and support can be obtained by referring to the AQA website (see below) or from each centre's Controlled Assessment Adviser. The Unit 2 guidance document provides suggestions for links to the relevant strand, although it should be borne in mind that this is not an exhaustive list.

Guidance

In addition to this report, centres are encouraged to refer to the following guidance on the GCSE Music pages of the AQA website:

- Unit 2 Guidance – in Guidance and Exemplar work
- Unit 2 Notes for Guidance – in the Teacher Resource Bank
- Controlled Assessment Leaflet – in the Teacher Resource Bank

  http://web.aqa.org.uk/qual/newgcses/art_dan_dra_mus/new/music_materials.php

Mark Range and Award of Grades

Grade Boundaries and Cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA website.

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion