**General Certificate of Secondary Education
June 2012**

Music   **42704**

(Specification 4270)

Unit 4: Composing Music

Report on the Examination

UNIT 4 (42704) - COMPOSING MUSIC

As in the previous year, moderators reported a very wide and diverse entry of compositions for this unit. The majority of candidates entered compositions in styles that they were clearly engaged with and many of these were stimulating, creative and imaginative. A large number were outstanding and far exceeded what one might expect at this level. It was pleasing to see that in general there were not many pieces assessed in the bottom two mark bands.

Selecting an appropriate brief

As in the past, the most successful work came from centres where candidates had selected their own brief and had composed to their strengths. In these cases, candidates had clearly composed music which interested them and much of this work was well structured, coherent, imaginative, stimulating and idiomatically written for the chosen instruments and voices.

Unfortunately, moderators once again reported a significant number of cases where a prescribed brief had been given to all the candidates in the form of a class exercise and all candidates had tackled this in the same manner. For example, at one centre all the candidates had composed a twelve bar blues in C and, whilst all of these pieces followed the accepted twelve bar, three chord pattern, none were idiomatic, demonstrating the kind of understanding of musical ideas likely to achieve marks in the upper two bands. Blues music is certainly one genre where the performer is often the composer and has a deep understanding not only of the basic structural elements of the music, but also the finer details of expression that often comes from a good instrumental technique. There were some blues compositions that did demonstrate these attributes but they were few and far between and most often from electric guitarists, who had clearly spent a considerable amount of time honing their skills.

There also seemed to be a rise in the number of minimalist pieces this year. Unfortunately many of these did not demonstrate much understanding of the genre other than an over-exploitation of repetition. Often they had been composed on sequencing programmes or Sibelius, and the frequent use of pasted sections in many cases led to pieces that became monotonous. Some had grasped the principle of layering but few had exploited other techniques such as phasing or additive processes. Many were built upon simple rhythms and lacked the necessary use of syncopation and cross-rhythm that would have made the music more stimulating. As in the case of Blues compositions, not many candidates seemed to have any real affinity with the music.

Other examples of prescriptive genre-based briefs seen this year were similar to those of previous years and included:

- A variety of dance forms, the most popular being the waltz. Many of these were composed to a formula with the same rhythmic devices employed, same key, same structure and same modulation. Whilst many of these were effective, few were imaginative enough for the higher mark bands.

- Pieces based on structure, the most common being binary, ternary and rondo. In one centre all the pieces were in ternary form.

- Pieces where old Integrated Assignment Film Music briefs had been used and examples of film music in the horror genre where the music consisted mostly of computerised sound effects and little original material.

In general, giving prescriptive genre-based briefs to all candidates should be avoided wherever possible, especially a prescriptive task where an opening phrase is given as a starting point for the candidates to continue. There were certainly fewer instances this year.

Selecting the Areas of Study

All candidates must select at least two areas of study that are pertinent to their work. Unfortunately there were still too many cases this year where only one area of study had been selected and even, on some occasions, none at all. This information had to be requested before moderation could proceed. It is important to realise that the areas of study do not have to be selected at the outset. As the composition evolves, teachers may guide their candidates into making the best selection. Reference to the subject content page on page 6 of the specification can be really helpful in this respect and teachers may wish to consider giving this to their candidates so that they can cross-reference with their work and avoid making poor choices. This year, there were many examples of unsuitable choices, the most common being:

- Candidates choosing Rhythm & Metre when their work was restricted to simple rhythms, single metre and single tempo.

- Candidates choosing Harmony & Tonality when only using a small selection of chords, often just the primary triads, and in some cases producing incoherent harmonic clashes.

- Candidates choosing Melody & Texture when the melodic and textural content was limited. The most common examples of this were pieces for electric guitar relying purely on chords.

- Candidates choosing Timbre & Dynamics when the music lacked any dynamic contrast and instrumental timbres were explored in a limited manner, perhaps within only a narrow pitch range for the instrument or with instrumental/vocal parts that were unplayable.

- Candidates choosing Structure & Form where the structures were limited to repetition of simple two or four bar phrases with little or no development of ideas, or where the structure lacked coherence and tended to ramble.

Teachers should remember that the assessment must be based on the selected areas of study and the extent to which the candidate has been successful in the use of them. It is therefore extremely important that candidates not only select the relevant areas of study but also explain carefully on the Candidate Record Form (CRF) the extent to which they have been used. Once again, this was sadly lacking in a number of cases.

Structure & Form was again the most commonly selected area of study and is often seen as a wise choice given that almost any piece of music will have some sort of structure. However, in order to access the higher mark bands, candidates will need to demonstrate development in their music; whilst a straight paste of an earlier section might give the piece a sense of balance, further contrast and development is more likely to give the sense of wholeness and completeness required for top band marks. This might take the form of an additional counter-melody, change of accompaniment pattern or even a modulation.

The most successful candidates had clearly referenced the subject content section on page 6 of the specification, electing to explore some of the higher order aspects of the area of study. For example, successful candidates selecting **Texture & Melody** presented work that contained well balanced phrases that were idiomatically written for the selected

instrument/voice, using a variety of techniques such as ornamentation, textural variety and in particular the ability to handle contrapuntal writing. Successful candidates selecting **Timbre & Dynamics** were able to write imaginatively for their chosen instruments, exploiting the full range of instrumental capabilities and using appropriate dynamic contrasts to create excitement in their music. They nearly always explained this carefully on the Candidate Record Form demonstrating a complete understanding of the compositional process.

Completing the Candidate Record Form

There were some excellent CRFs this year from both candidates and teachers. There was however a trend: good CRFs tended to come from whole centres. It was less common to find a mixture and even in centres where the compositional standards were variable, teachers managed to get their candidates to write to at least an acceptable standard on the CRF. Poorly completed CRFs were often poorly completed by both the candidate and the teacher, and moderators reported that in some cases there was so little information on the CRFs that the centre had to be contacted before moderation could proceed.

Centres are reminded that the first three pages ***must be completed by the candidate and not by the teacher.*** Moderators came across more examples this year where it appeared that the teacher had done this for the candidate.

Moderators found that the most successful candidates included plenty of information on page 2 of the CRF explaining *how and why* they had chosen the areas of study rather than just stating *which* areas had been used. The very best of these often attached a separate typed sheet to the CRF and this is perfectly acceptable if all the questions are answered fully. However, moderators also reported many examples where little or no information that related to the areas of study was presented, and in these cases it was often difficult to gauge the level of understanding of the candidates.

By far the area of greatest weakness in the completion of the CRF was page 3. For 2012 the form was set out slightly differently so that the three questions were separated, making completion easier. Each of these sections must be completed so that the moderator can make an accurate assessment of the candidate's work. Some comments and suggestions follow.

1. **Details of how you have used software packages and original or borrowed sources**
   It is essential that candidates acknowledge the use of software packages and, in particular, where pre-prepared samples and loops have been used. There were once again some examples where candidates had presented work that was exclusively made up from samples and loops from software packages, with little or no original *composed* material at all. In these examples, *candidates will have demonstrated a rudimentary understanding of the ideas in relation to the areas of study* and could therefore only qualify for marks in the lowest band.

2. **Details of help given by other musicians/teachers in the composing process**
   This can also relate to the recording of the composition. If another person contributes a part to the recording that has not been scored/composed by the candidate, then that person has contributed to the composition. This might include an elaborate accompaniment from a simple chord chart or a complex improvised solo.

3. **Details of help given by other musicians in the recording process. If your score is not in staff notation or detailed tab and other musicians have played/sung on**

your recording, explain how you communicated to them what you wanted them to perform

Completion of this section was the most unsatisfactory and caused many problems for moderators. In the worst cases it was difficult to see how any marks could be awarded to the candidates at all. One moderator reported a case where the only scored material was a sketchy chord pattern and the resulting sophisticated recording produced from this contained no evidence of input from the candidate at all. It is not sufficient to state in this section 'I told the guitarist what I wanted and he played it for me' since this provides no evidence that the candidate has composed that part. Candidates should wherever possible provide scored evidence that they have been responsible for the composition of all the presented parts in the recording. Of course, there were many circumstances in which candidates performed the majority of parts themselves through the use of sequencing and/or multi-tracking. These are perfectly acceptable without staff notated scores because intentions will be evident.

Using ICT in composition

It is clear that many schools have invested heavily in Sibelius and this was by far the most common programme used in composing. There were indeed some excellent pieces that had been composed using Sibelius. These tended to be from candidates who had a fine grasp of staff notation and a firm understanding of melodic construction, harmonic progression and rhythmic variety. However, in a great many cases Sibelius had appeared to impose restrictions on some candidates. This was most evident in cases where rhythmic note values had been limited to quavers, crotchets and minims with little or no attempt to explore dotted rhythms, use of triplets and syncopation. In addition, many of these pieces tended to lack melodic/harmonic shape and direction and as a result, the pieces demonstrated limitations in the handling of musical ideas. The two most common pitfalls encountered by moderators were:

- Song-writing where candidates had produced the recording using a voice sound from Sibelius. In many cases, the underlay simply did not work. These problems may have been evident had an attempt been made to sing the vocal parts as part of the compositional process.
- Woodwind and brass parts that were excessively long with little or no room for breathing.

Sequencing packages were also widely used this year, the most common being Cubase, Logic and Garageband in centres using MACs. Whilst these often produced excellent results in that they allowed candidates to utilise their performing skills in composition, they still provided some restrictions. Common problems were:

- Pieces that tended to rely too heavily on repetitive, short, layered ostinato/riff type passages with little or no development of the musical material.
- Over-use of cut and paste resulting in very little variety and contrast in the music.
- A lack of contrast in the overall structure due to absence of development of initial ideas.
- A tendency to rely heavily on layering to the detriment of contrast.

The Musical Score

Teachers are reminded that the score should be appropriate to the nature and genre of the music presented. If candidates are able to produce a detailed staff notated score, perhaps through the use of a sequencing programme, that is fine; however, annotated type scores detailing the structure and content of the music can be just as effective in amplifying a candidate's intentions and scores can include any or all of the following:

- staff notation
- graphic notation
- tab
- a written account detailing the structure and content of the music
- a combination of some or all of these

There were some excellent scores this year and a more diverse selection than hitherto seen. A selection of alternative scores to staff notation has been published on the AQA website and it was evident that many candidates had used a similar format. The potential for taking screenshots of staff notation and inserting them into a word document was the most obvious example, but screenshots of the overall structure of a sequencing programme such as Cubase or Garageband give little insight into the detail of the music. Once again, staff notated scores from *Sibelius* were generally very good, though sometimes lacking in performance detail. Scores from *Cubase and Logic* were often acceptable, but not always properly formatted prior to printing.

Teachers are once again reminded that a score, along with a recording and fully completed CRF, is a specification requirement and is part of the assessment.

Controlled Assessment

It is worth repeating the information provided in last year's report; this in turn re-states the guidance on controlled assessment which is in the GCSE Music Teacher Resource Bank. Teachers must be able to confirm that the work submitted by each candidate is their own unaided work. To ensure this can be done, all work, with the exception of research and preparation, must be completed under informal supervision. Informal supervision means that as the teacher responsible for assessment, you must ensure that:

- in cases of collaborative work, the contributions of individual candidates are recorded accurately
- plagiarism does not take place
- work can be authenticated as the candidate's own
- sources used by candidates are clearly recorded and acknowledged.

Candidates do not need to be under direct supervision at all times. It is, however, expected that the majority of work submitted for assessment will be carried out in the classroom. In this way, you can state with confidence that the work submitted has not been plagiarised or downloaded from the Internet.

Candidates may need to complete some work outside the classroom, for example, they may need access to musical instruments not available in the classroom. This is acceptable if the teacher has supervised a significant proportion of the work in the classroom and is happy that the quality of work subsequently submitted is of an identical standard as that seen in the classroom. In short, it is the teacher's responsibility to be able to authenticate that the work submitted is solely that of the candidate concerned. If you have any doubts about the authenticity of work completed at home, you will need to question the candidate about the content/nature of the work undertaken or the candidate will need to complete the same work again in the classroom.

Circumstances where the controlled assessment conditions had not been met this year were generally similar to last year, and the most common problems were:

- *Compositions that had been completed at home*. The bulk of the work must be completed in school so that the teacher responsible for assessment can verify that it is the work of the candidate and that it has been completed during the 25 hours.

- *Compositions recorded outside the centre unsupervised*. Compositions may be recorded outside the centre but only when this can be supervised and verified by the teacher responsible for assessment. In some cases candidates acknowledged that their pieces were recorded in a professional studio outside the centre by professional musicians and without access to a detailed score. This is clearly unacceptable.

- *Excessive teacher input*, for example where a significant proportion of material had been given to the candidate or where ongoing support had been excessive to the extent that the outcome appeared to be more teacher work than candidate work. There were several candidates who acknowledged that their teachers had played parts for them (without scored material from the candidate) because they were unable to do so. In these cases candidates cannot gain credit for that part and adjustments must be made accordingly in the assessment.

- *Group compositions where it was not possible to clearly identify the work of the candidate* in the recording, where scores were weak or even non-existent. In some cases, the candidates appeared not to have been involved in the recordings at all.

In addition to the above, there was again a small number of examples of direct plagiarism where candidates had deliberately entered music written by established composers or recording artists. Teachers are reminded that it would be advisable to *frequently* remind all candidates that this is unacceptable and alert them to the possible consequences of plagiarism and malpractice.

Assessment

The accuracy of centres' assessment was very varied. Many centres assessed their candidates' compositions fairly and accurately with detailed reference on the CRF to the assessment criteria. A few centres undervalued their candidates' work, but unfortunately moderators reported a large proportion of centres overvaluing the work in relation to the assessment criteria, some by up to three or even four mark bands. In many of these cases, the teachers had written very little or nothing at all on page 4 of the CRF, making moderation very difficult.

Teachers who provided more information, especially in the final paragraph of the CRF, were often more accurate in their assessments. Most teachers (but not all) made some reference to the assessment criteria in the final section but often this did little to explain the marking process. The best examples were where teachers made reference to the assessment criteria in the relevant mark bands and then pointed to specific relevant evidence of the musical features in their candidates' work. A good example of this can be found in the 2011 report. This is certainly the best way of tackling the assessment process and is likely to lead to a more accurate assessment.

Administration

In the vast majority of cases centre administration was excellent. However, moderators did report a small number of problems that regularly caused delays in moderation:

- Sending packages through the post with a postal service requiring a signature: many moderators are also teachers and may not be at home to receive the package. This can involve lengthy journeys to collect parcels, and therefore significant delays.

- CD recordings: whilst the vast majority of these were excellent there were some that had inaccurate or missing track listings. Please also ensure that the track number is indicated in the box on page 2 of the CRF.
- Centres with a small number of candidates which sent only the Centre Mark Sheet by the deadline date: please remember that if you have 20 or fewer candidates you need to send all the work to the moderator by the deadline.

Mark Range and Award of Grades

Grade Boundaries and Cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics (www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat.html) page of the AQA website.

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