



A-LEVEL MUSIC

7272/C - Composition
Report on the Examination

7272
June 2018

Version: 1.0

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General Comments

Specifications may come and go, but the diversity of students' creative work only ever expands. The diversity reflects music's vast appeal and potential to connect with all musical interests, experiences and temperaments through the styles and energies that students explore; it also reflects diversity of ambition, industry, techniques and – ultimately – standard.

With the new A-level Music specification, some aspects of the requirements for composition are new. All students now have to submit two compositions; one addressing one of the Briefs set by AQA, and a 'Free' composition which is a project of the student's own choosing.

Another change has been the specified minimum duration which is stipulated in the specification and on the front of the Component 3 Briefs. The minimum duration (four and a half minutes) is for the two compositions combined. There were some Composition submissions which failed to reach this minimum duration and the instructions in the specification on the front of the paper state that a submission of less than the minimum duration will not be accepted as assessment evidence.

A third new factor is that A-level students are (by and large) now not facing the task of producing composition work for assessment in Year 12. Indeed, the Briefs for Composition 1 are not available until mid-September in Year 13. This opens up the whole of year 12 as a time which, rather than focussing on producing coursework for assessment, can be focussed on developing skills and understanding of compositional processes. Teachers could lead this process through making perceptive links between analytical work and composition, developing exercises that focus on ways to enhance the handling of specific elements, and by discussing musical styles from across time and around the world.

Ultimately, all encounters with music can provoke a compositional response, and the more this is encouraged, the more a student will gain techniques, imagination and confidence.

Composition 1: Composition to a Brief

All seven Briefs generated some very high quality responses where students had clearly taken ownership of the initial idea and created a composition that exhibited ambition, musical intelligence and individuality.

Brief 1 - the Chorales option – was by far the most popular option: just under half of students selected this Brief. Of the others, Briefs 2 and 3 were next most popular, with the remainder fairly evenly split between the other four options.

In the mark scheme for Composition 1, the mark bands each include a phrase relating to the 'use of the Brief' ranging from 'Rudimentary use is made of the Brief' up to 'Imaginative use of the Brief fundamentally informs the composition'. Where the given material in the Brief was altogether discarded – for example, the lyrics in Brief 2, the mode in Brief 6 – only a mark of zero could be awarded.

Brief 1

A substantial majority of students provided enough evidence to suggest some knowledge of technique and style. Important aspects in handling exercises of this nature will include:

- understanding the tonal context and opportunities for modulation in each phrase

- writing strong cadences
- creating idiomatic vocal lines that use register appropriately to give well-spaced chords
- finding occasions for passing chromaticism
- incorporating some quaver motion, especially via passing notes and suspensions.

The few very weak solutions had fundamental difficulty in constructing coherent harmony. Above this were a number of submissions which seemed not to consider using accidentals, leading to some missed (and necessary) modulations, as well as modulations that only happened at the cadence, without anticipation. There were also many solutions that found successful modulations, but the result was affected by technical errors.

Common technical errors included:

- parallel 5ths and octaves (sometimes by contrary motion)
- use of a 7th that failed to resolve downwards by step
- use of a 4th that was not prepared and/ or failed to fall to the 3rd
- an augmented interval appearing in a vocal line
- unnecessary doubling of a major 3rd
- unsuitable use of a 2nd inversion chord
- unlikely chord choices including III, VIb, and V moving to IV
- inaccurately copying of the given melodic line.

Sometimes an inappropriate level of ambition was found, for example solutions which had no quaver motion and harmonised every melodic minim with a minim chord, and also solutions that were overladen with unceasing activity extending even to semiquavers.

One common concern was evidence that students had not perceived the context of chorales as choral music in which all four voice parts need to be able to deliver the text (which for these questions exists only hypothetically). Where an inner part is found to be reiterating the same pitch as two crotchets underneath the soprano's minim, that context has been lost.

With regards to what tempo the chorales should be, the answer is that students need to make a musically informed decision based on their solution: harmonised in such a way to have an elegant flow that brings out a one-in-the-bar feel, the first question could go quite fast; likewise, a harmonisation of the second tune that brings out a stately nature through some shrewd quaver motion and use of dissonance could be better served by a slow tempo. Looking at different harmonisations of the same chorale melody (eg in Reimenschneider) and seeing how the resulting character of the music changes, could be instructive in this regard. Through choosing an appropriate tempo for their solution, the student is communicating strong evidence for the musical concept of their work.

Question 1

Most answers found a perfect cadence in F at b.4, a perfect cadence in C major at b.8 and a perfect cadence in B \flat at b.12. Many students included the dominant 7th, but where the tune rose to the mediant in bars 4 and 12, this produced either a doubled major 3rd or a dominant 7th that didn't fall. Many, but not all, students used a Phrygian cadence in D minor at b.12; often this included parallels – either octaves with the soprano, or 5ths with the bass caused by the inclusion of a passing note in the inner part. The final cadence clearly has to be perfect in F, but many failed to include an idiomatic 4-3 suspension on the dominant chord, instead landing on the dominant 7th in unidiomatic fashion.

Some students failed to prepare for the modulation to C major in the second phrase; others introduced the B \flat as early as b.5, leading to a rather tautological harmonisation in this phrase. The strongest solutions saw the opportunity for treating b.5 as I-VIIb-Ib in D minor, and then turned to C major in b.6. Similarly, a few solutions turned to G minor for b.17 allowing for the chromatic inflection of an F \sharp on beat 2.

Question 2

Seven cadences are required by this melody, and this required some careful planning.

For instance, it is possible to write a very secure perfect cadence in G major in b.14; however, this undermines the potential of the final phrase to provide a strong, culminating effect as the final cadence must be perfect in G. One option was to have an interrupted cadence at b.14 – the penultimate phrase could be considered the classic place for such a cadence. There was a pitfall for compositions which went this far, but were then reliant on the V-vi interruption: parallel 5ths between soprano and bass.

A more successful option was to have V-V 7 b of ii, which comes replete with a falling diminished 5th in the bass and can resolve onto A minor at the start of the final phrase, but not many solutions took this option. An alternative for the penultimate cadence was to use a Phrygian cadence in E minor. This also could be used for the cadence at b.7-8; not every solution demonstrated knowledge that a single chorale is very unlikely to have two Phrygian cadences. (A further Phrygian cadence – this time in A minor – was possible in b.14).

A few solutions found a way to twist the cadence at b.10 into being a perfect in B minor. Resourceful though this is, the relative minor of the dominant is an unlikely – and ultimately unconvincing – place to be at the halfway point of a major key chorale. The seemingly innocuous phrase at b.11-12 also generated some indecision as to its tonal home.

In a chorale of this length, thought needs to be given to demonstrating a repertoire of options. The cadences at b.2-3 and b.16-17 are melodically identical; many made them harmonically identical. Stronger solutions, under the minim A, used V $^{4-3}$ for one and II 7 b-V for the other.

Brief 2

This Brief was based on the setting to music of some lyrics. Weaker responses had difficulty in finding a suitable melodic rhythm for the given lyrics, or an appropriate contour. Also, there was often little sense of contrast between verse and chorus, with harmonic palette, melodic register, texture and drum pattern being largely unchanged.

Stronger responses not only made more of this structural aspect, but enhanced it with a second verse of original lyrics that followed on metrically from the first whilst intensifying the poetry; there were some good bridge sections or instrumental breaks, and choruses were sometimes enhanced on later reiterations through tonal and/or textural change. Compositions which did not include additional lyrics, or at least repeat the given ones, could result in a piece only 90 seconds long which is rather short for a ballad.

A very wide range of styles were represented in the various settings of the lyrics. A number of these were presented with an aural guide rather than a full score. Generally, many of these could have made a stronger case for the composition through better layout and/or more detail of musical content.

Brief 3

The Circus context appeared to appeal to many students, and there were many compositions for this Brief that went at least some way towards conveying the effervescent atmosphere of the Big Top.

Choice of instrumentation was a significant aspect to this brief. The vast majority used a brass ensemble, with many adding some woodwinds and/or percussion to the band. This facilitated a fanfare-like opening for the Ringmaster. Those who only had a brass quintet at their disposal found it difficult to create characterful music for the Acrobats; swirling flutes and tinkling glockenspiels were found to be helpful in other compositions for this section.

Many appeared to find it difficult to capture something suitably leonine for the Lions, though some enterprising compositions incorporated a sample of a snarling beast. The most successful versions of this passage involved combining a slow tempo with low register brass and some detailed dynamics. The benefit of this was not only to give a suitable character to the music for this section, but also to give the overall composition a passage of distinctive contrast.

Clown music was often created with aplomb. There were plenty of trombone glissandi and some compositions alluded to the famous 'Entry of the Gladiators' by Julius Fučík. Stronger responses made some highly effective (and controlled) use of deliberately dissonant harmony and lopsided syncopated rhythms. Some found a comic timbre from a xylophone. Most compositions finished with a flourish, though there was not always a strong sense of this passage being based on a march, as required by the brief. Those who had included a snare drum in their instrumental forces could put it to good use here.

Brief 4

The nature of this Brief – continuing a given opening to a music theatre song – invited creativity on two levels: the musical, and dramatic context.

Some responses appeared to have found it challenging to embrace the components of the musical material provided, with its twists of chromatic harmony and use of a compound metre that incorporated hemiola and duplet quavers too. Others responses seized on some, or all, of these features and created some very interesting songs.

There was considerable variety in the instrumentation selected for the accompaniment. Some compositions settled for only piano, and often these were less successful as the piano writing itself had limited character and variety of texture. Stronger compositions explored a range of instrumental colour; whilst full orchestra was used by a few, often the most successful results came from a thoughtfully chosen small ensemble.

A fascinating aspect of the compositions submitted for this Brief was the range of dramatic contexts that were imagined for the continuation of the song. Whilst some stayed close to the romantic theme of the given lyrics and interpreted the 'middle-aged character' as a mellowing man grateful to have found love and security in later life, in other versions this character was (variously) nervous, and full of bitter recriminations about an ex-wife.

Brief 5

This Brief presented students with two rhythm patterns for untuned percussion, one in 3/4 and the other in 4/4. The Latin flavour of this material was enthusiastically seized upon by most students, and there was plenty of salsa-infused music for examiners to savour.

Only a few compositions took the option to explore both patterns in the course of the composition. Those which did often gained a stronger sense of structure from utilising this metrical change, though few coupled it with a change of tonality, register, or even dynamic. The majority of compositions which concentrated on just the one pattern favoured the quadruple metre option.

Whilst there was some enjoyable Latin-styled jazz, sometimes recorded by fine school big bands, more could have been done in manipulating the material provided in the Brief. Just having the scrapers and shakers as an ostinato presence throughout the piece, possibly with the occasional break, only represents 'satisfactory use of the Brief informs the composition' – a descriptor for the 11 to 15 mark band. Occasionally, some imaginative compositions found ways to unravel the individual lines from the 4-threaded percussive plait provided, and there was a potential to explore some of the rhythms of the percussion section in the pitched instruments of the band.

Brief 6

There were several compositions which confidently followed the instruction in the Brief to use folk instruments in their composition, and among those used by students were bodhrán, accordion, duduk, and sitar.

The Brief required the piece to be based on mode that was provided in the instruction. This has various names including the Byzantine mode and the double harmonic major scale. What is significant about it is the intervallic pattern that incorporates various interesting features:

- the bottom half (C, D \flat , E, F) is the same as the top half (G, A \flat , B, C)
- the order of intervals (semitone, augmented 2nd, semitone, tone, semitone, augmented second, semitone) is palindromic: the same rising as falling.

It was disappointing that a fascination with these inherent patterns in the mode and eagerness to explore them was not more clearly seen in the compositions submitted. For instance, no compositions made effective use of the fact that a melodic shape in the bottom half of the mode could be re-used in the top half.

Encouragingly, there were some compositions which made good use of the very characterful interval of the augmented 2nd in the mode; fewer explored the darkness of the 'Phrygian 2nd'.

Most compositions responding to this Brief followed the requirement for tempo change during the piece. This usually resulted in accelerando. No compositions chose to tease the listener by taking the accelerando so far, and then reverting to a slow tempo before making a second – more extreme – accelerando to a frenzied culmination.

Brief 7

This Brief required a response to some lines of poetry by TS Eliot in an atonal idiom for chamber ensemble. Although some appeared to look at the lines only briefly, for others it proved to be an idea of considerable interest and creative endeavour.

The Brief did not require a song to be composed, though there were a few submitted, including some incorporating some Sprechstimme. There were also some compositions with the poetry wholly spoken by a narrator. Others used the words as a jumping-off point for a purely instrumental composition. String quartet was sometimes the chosen medium; other mixed small ensembles were also used.

There was a requirement for the music to be atonal. Responses to this ranged from an atonality that was essentially consonant but avoided (just) a sense of key centre, to strictly dodecaphonic music. The latter ran the risk that in the intense focus on serialist processes, there was little clear response to the detail in the poetry.

The most successful responses used a more intuitive atonal language in which the uncertainty from a lack of tonal gravity provided a fascinating response to lines such as ‘Allow but little consciousness’ and the moments in the harbour and the draughty church.

There was, perhaps, some undiscovered potential for the references to time to be explored more imaginatively in the music. The links between the opening and penultimate lines regarding past and future were rarely used as a structural aspect of the music.

One excellent aspect of nearly all submissions for this Brief was the presentation of the scores; these were full of performance detail, especially where some advanced playing techniques were explored.

Composition 2: Free composition

Each submission for Composition 2 is, very specifically, unique, which therefore limits how much can be commented upon that is relevant to all submissions. Among the works seen was everything from choral music in a pastiche Renaissance idiom to Electronic Dance Music, via a 6-movement Baroque orchestral suite, piano pieces as diverse as Baroque fugue and imitation Einaudi, all manner of jazz, pop ballads, and lavish Zimmer-esque film scores. It may be beneficial to reflect on this diversity and to think about how this choice of project pertains to the context of A-level for each student.

There are two important points to raise here. Firstly, this is A-level. There is the potential for students to misjudge the project they set themselves, and here they can benefit from the experience of their teacher in advising on whether the ‘question’ they are setting themselves is of an appropriate demand for A-level, but not so challenging that it is unduly difficult. This is, to some extent, parallel to the choice of repertoire for performance.

Some styles of music can draw the composer into compositional choices that are simpler than required for an A-level composition. Among the characteristics that may result are:

- overuse of simple repetition (relevant to both song structures and minimalism)

- a narrow harmonic palette restricted by diatonicism, root positions and predictable harmonic rhythm
- little variety of texture, seen in a limited approach to register, the melody always being at the top of the texture, and unchanging accompaniment patterns
- unchanging phrase lengths in the melodic writing
- a restricted sense of instrumental colour due to each player having the same role throughout the piece (melody, bass line, etc)

There is no style of music that cannot be successfully explored in a way that avoids enough of these issues to lift the result to being of A-level standard, but some good imaginative thinking needs to inform the creative process.

Similarly, there are some choices of project that can over-extend the compositional challenge well beyond what might reasonably be expected of an A-level student. Among the characteristics that may result are:

- composing for very large orchestras
- highly virtuoso writing, especially for piano
- choosing to write in complex metres
- attempting to use the harmonic vocabulary of late Romanticism
- composing fugues
- over-indulging in complex syncopation in a jazz idiom.

The second important factor is that the project needs to suit the individual student such that it uses their musical experience and fires their musical creativity. For some, the daunting challenge can be that tailor-made project. For others, it will be important to think how best to channel their musical experience – practical, analytical, and recreational – into a suitable project. Composing for instruments of which they do not have experience is probably going to be an unwise choice unless some well-focussed research is undertaken first.

Different people are inspired in different ways. Where some find the patterns of composition – rhythmic, melodic, harmonic or textural – to be full of potential for development and musical exploration, others find some non-musical part of their lives to be the genesis for a musical creativity. This is testament to the potential for composition to be a powerful outlet for individual expression. The examiners wish to congratulate their collective authentic creativity.

Administration

Composition submissions can be demanding of teachers as there are several aspects to be incorporated; examiners are grateful for all the hard work and care taken by teachers in assembling the work.

There were, however, some issues in this area this year:

Notated Scores / Lead Sheets / Aural Guides

The mark scheme requires examiners to consider the written material submitted with descriptors ranging from 'poor in detail and layout' to 'comprehensive'. Factors to bear in mind include:

- Scores are best edited to include sufficient performance directions and scaled to fit onto a sensible number of pages. Submitting a set of parts is an unacceptable alternative to a score and unnecessary in addition to a score.

- Lead sheets need to have sufficient information to be suitable as a resource for creating a performance of the piece. Therefore an absent melodic line, a lack of information over the kind of textures intended in the accompaniment, and no information on how improvised sections are to be inspired, are all significant omissions.
- Aural guides have considerable potential to inform the examiner about the structure and details of a composition. Careful thought needs to be given as to how best to do this for each composition. It is almost inevitable that some kind of timeline will be needed. An aural guide that refers to bar numbers when there is no score is an impractical way to describe the piece.

Whichever method is chosen for communicating the composition on paper, the examiners recommend that the document need only be printed on A4 and held together with a paperclip. It is advised that staples are avoided.

Recordings

The majority of students relied on computer playback for their compositions, but the examiners were sometimes treated to a fine 'live' performance. Some students who composed songs helpfully submitted a recording with a singer delivering the text over the computer playback of the accompaniment.

Whilst 'live' recordings are very welcome, it can lead to some significant discrepancies with the score. These should be referred to in the programme note, and it may be a good idea to send a computer-generated version too (as many did).

Just occasionally there was an issue with an incomplete, inaccessible or simply missing recording. Please always check CDs before sealing your parcel. USB sticks are not a preferable alternative.

Please do not make announcements on the CDs. These only delay the examiner and are not necessary if the track numbers are correctly filled in on the Candidate Record Form and submissions are clearly labelled. A track list can be helpful in addition for a centre-compilation CD.

Candidate Record Forms (CRFs)

Nearly all schools and colleges were using the correct 2018 CRF (available on the AQA website). Occasionally either or both of the two signatures required were missing.

The tidiest way to present a student's work is usually to copy the CRF back-to-back on A3 and fold it around the scores and programme notes of the student.

Final comment

The composition component has generated some very fine creative work from this year's cohort – the first to take on the new specification. In responses to all seven Briefs and in the free composition there were examples of highly imaginative and intelligent work. The examiners appreciate all the hard work that has come from the students themselves and from the teachers guiding and advising them.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.