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# A-LEVEL MUSIC

7272/W: Appraising Music  
Report on the Examination

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## Introduction

This is the second year of examination of the new specification and it is encouraging to see that students have generally improved upon the performance of last year's cohort and that there were fewer issues relating to answering inadmissible combinations of questions. We hope this is a sign of centres' growing confidence in preparing their students for this paper, with its many different sets of options. There was still a small number of students who either answered too few (ie one) or too many (ie all three) questions in Section B.

## Section A (Listening)

Area of Study 1 is compulsory; two other optional AOS must be tackled, making a total of nine questions to be answered in this section. The third question in each AOS requires a more extended piece of writing. In all cases, the audio excerpts are taken from music by the named composers or artists, avoiding set works and material listed on AQA's suggested listening list. An exception to this is the Baroque Solo Concerto in AOS1, in which any music from this genre could appear on the paper.

The breakdown of options selected in Section A this year was close to that in 2018, with AOS4 being by far the most popular and AOS6 the least popular. Approximate percentage breakdown is given below (N.B. this totals 200%, as students must opt for two AOS):

- AOS 2 37%
- AOS 3 44%
- AOS 4 55%
- AOS 5 35%
- AOS 6 5%
- AOS 7 24%.

## Area of study 1: Western classical tradition 1650-1910

**Question 1 (Handel: Organ Concerto in d minor, HWV 304 no.1, last movement)**

**Question 2 (Mozart: 'Non mi dir' from 'Don Giovanni')**

**Question 3 (Chopin: Nocturne in E flat major, Op.9 no.2)**

The four questions on the Handel Organ Concerto covered a variety of basic elements – metre, texture, modulation and melodic structure – and produced a wide level of differentiation. In each case, the majority of students were able to select or produce the correct answer, though this was more reliably the case in relation to texture and melodic structure.

The dictation question on a Mozart aria also produced a wide spread of marks, with more than a quarter of students achieving full marks. In general, it was clear that some students found the bass clef section more difficult. Some students omitted to place a flat in front of the bass note D in bar 8 and thus sadly failed to gain a mark.

The Chopin excerpt – from a well-known and absolutely typical piece – stimulated some very effective responses. It was pleasing to see the vast majority of students writing with at least some acknowledgement of recognisable stylistic features. The main differentiating factor between answers was the degree to which they were illustrated with appropriate examples from the track itself. Many students wrote accurately about the use of rubato and melodic decoration and several also made reference to the overall structure of the excerpt. Harmony and tonality were less

confidently tackled in general. Although the piece is in 12/8 time, it was perfectly acceptable to write about this piece as being in waltz time, given the repetition of what many students described as an ‘um-cha-cha’ left-hand accompaniment pattern. Anyone describing this as ‘um-cha’ was unfortunately misrepresenting what could be heard.

### **Area of study 2: Pop music**

**Question 4 (Joni Mitchell: ‘Little Green’ from ‘Blue’)**

**Question 5 (Muse: ‘Assassin’ from ‘Black Holes and Revelations’)**

**Question 6 (Stevie Wonder: ‘Don’t You Worry ‘Bout A Thing’ from ‘Innervisions’)**

A large number of students found the pitch aspects of questions 4 and 5 difficult. The bass guitar was reasonably reliably identified in the Muse excerpt, but the repeated 6<sup>th</sup> that it played towards the end was not often recognised.

Responses to the Stevie Wonder excerpt dealt quite well with aspects of rhythm and instrumentation and sometimes discussed the vocal melody in some detail. Features of harmony and tonality (such a distinctive aspect of Stevie Wonder’s style) tended to be discussed only in the most general terms.

### **Area of study 3: Music for media**

**Question 7 (Michael Giacchino: ‘This is me’ from ‘Ratatouille’)**

**Question 8 (Hans Zimmer: ‘160 BPM’ from ‘Angels and Demons’)**

**Question 9 (Thomas Newman: ‘The Church of Glass’ from ‘Oscar and Lucinda’)**

The two most taxing questions appeared to be the correct identification of the chord sequence in the Giacchino and the parallel intervals in the Zimmer.

The Thomas Newman excerpt, with its vivid and varied orchestration, drew some detailed and expressive writing from students, though this often failed to get beyond description of the opening or to discuss important elements such as tonality, harmony and metre.

### **Area of study 4: Music for theatre**

**Question 10 (Stephen Sondheim: ‘The Miller’s Son’ from ‘A Little Night Music’)**

**Question 11 (Richard Rodgers: ‘How do you solve a problem like Maria?’ from ‘The Sound of Music’)**

**Question 12 (Jason Robert Brown: ‘Look at Me’ from ‘The Bridges of Madison County’)**

Students were generally secure in describing the change of metre and use of the bassoon in the Sondheim and the use of a pedal in the Rodgers. Other questions were handled with mixed success; it seemed particularly difficult to spot the use of the tonic minor key in the Rodgers.

The Jason Robert Brown excerpt, like the Newman, also produced some effective responses, with most students finding something appropriate to say about a variety of musical elements, with melody and texture featuring strongly. There was some confusion over metre and rhythm and, as with other questions of this sort, harmony was dealt with convincingly by only a minority of students. Overall, this was one of the better answered of the 10-mark questions in Section A.

**Area of study 5: Jazz****Question 13 (Gwilym Simcock: ‘Sneaky’ from ‘Perception’)****Question 14 (Duke Ellington: ‘Rockin’ in Rhythm’ from ‘1931 The Okeh Ellington’)****Question 15 (Miles Davis: ‘Blues by Five’ from ‘Cookin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet’)**

The Simcock excerpt produced a wide spread of marks; only one question (on the saxophone interval) was answered correctly by the majority. The Ellington was more uniformly well done. However, some students seemed unaware of which instruments were likely to be members of a rhythm section.

The Miles Davis question tended not to be as well done as many of the other 10-mark questions. The ‘Cool’ style of Jazz was not Davis’s only contribution to stylistic development and this track is more in the ‘Hard Bop’ idiom that he helped to pioneer, often relying on an edgy, up-tempo version of the Blues. References to modal improvisation were, therefore, rather out of place in discussing a piece which relies obviously upon the Blues changes, albeit with several sophisticated harmonic embellishments. There were some effective answers which focused on melodic details in Davis’s solo, showing awareness of his distinctive style. Harmonic awareness was less evident.

**Area of study 6: Contemporary Traditional Music****Question 16 (Mariza: ‘Promete, Jura’ from ‘Fado Tradicional’)****Question 17 (Anoushka Shankar: ‘Flight’ from ‘Traces of You’)****Question 18 (Piazzolla: ‘Buenos Aires Hora Cero’)**

There was a marked contrast between the Mariza and Shankar excerpts in terms of apparent difficulty, with the former seeming much harder than the latter.

The Piazzolla, with its wide range of colourful special effects and typical ‘Tango Nuevo’ instrumentation and harmonic and rhythmic features, offered students plenty to write about. However, too few of them did so with much authority and this was one of the less well-answered 10-mark questions overall, with no students reaching the top mark band.

**Area of study 7: Art Music since 1910****Question 19 (Messiaen: ‘Turangalila-Symphonie’, movement VI)****Question 20 (Reich: ‘After the War’ from ‘Different Trains’)****Question 21 (MacMillan: ‘Like a very fast reel’ from ‘From Ayrshire’)**

Most students correctly identified the melodic pattern in the Reich and were able to gain some credit for discussion of the looping and fragmentation of the spoken fragment in this piece. All of the other questions in this Area of study proved more difficult.

MacMillan’s ‘From Ayrshire’ offers a concise encapsulation of important aspects of his style, balancing the ancient and modern. The excerpt prompted several good attempts to engage with this, and overall this was the most well-answered 10-mark question in Section A, with nearly 10% of students who attempted it gaining 8, 9 or 10 out of 10.

## Section B (Analysis)

**Question 22 (Purcell: Trumpet Sonata, movement 1, bb.11-29)**

**Question 23 (Mozart: 'La vendetta', from 'Le nozze di Figaro', bb.30-72)**

**Question 24 (Grieg: 'Norwegian March', Op.54 no.2, bb.107-159)**

By far the most popular excerpt was the Purcell; the Grieg was slightly more popular than the Mozart.

This section of the paper is the one in which students made the most significant advances over last year but in which there is still room for a great deal of improvement.

In many cases, questions about keys (22.1, 23.1, 24.2) should have been better answered, with too many students simply looking at the key signature rather than analysing the score. Of the other short, technical harmony questions (locating a 4-3 suspension in the Purcell, an augmented 6<sup>th</sup> chord in the Mozart and a 3<sup>rd</sup> inversion tonic chord in the Grieg), all showed up a high degree of uncertainty amongst students.

The questions on the Purcell and Grieg were structured in a similar way to one another and highlighted an issue which needs clarification. The 5-mark questions in Section B will normally focus on a particular element, perhaps within a limited section of the excerpt, and ask for some contextual knowledge of style; the 10-mark questions will be broader-ranging, dealing with several elements across the whole excerpt, usually relating it to the set work as a whole. In this case, both Q.22.3 and 24.3 asked about the handling of melody. Suitable topics to explore would include the basic pitch and rhythmic shapes and range of the melody, phrase-structure, motivic manipulation (such as sequence, inversion, augmentation/diminution) and ornamentation. Too many students wrote in this answer about the way the melody is shared out antiphonally in the Purcell or the way it is swapped between the hands in the Grieg. These observations properly belong in a discussion of texture or the use of instruments, and thus should have been written about in questions 22.4 and 24.4.

Question 23.3 on Mozart's use of brass and timpani tended to elicit superficial descriptions of what can be seen in the score, without much appreciation of the limitations of the historical instruments.

In contrast 23.4 (on Mozart's use of various musical elements to help depict Bartolo's character) was slightly better done than the parallel questions, with many students enjoying the chance to explore the comic depiction of pomposity.

All of the 10-mark questions in Section B produced some work in the top band of the mark scheme, scoring 9 or 10 out of 10. There were some particularly clear and detailed answers on the Grieg.

## Section C (Essay)

The order of popularity of the various choices of essay exactly matched those of the Areas of Study in Section A, with question 27 being by far the most popular and question 29 the least.

All Areas of Study produced some examples of essays credited with marks in the top band (25-30), including some in AOS 2, 4 and 5 that were awarded full marks. Virtually all students who completed an essay were able to discuss two composers or artists in some detail.

In this section, examiners are looking for the following qualities, in order of importance:

1. evidence of detailed study and understanding – ie musical detail across a suitable selection of repertoire
2. intellectual dexterity – ie handling the evidence logically and persuasively in relation to the question (not simply reproducing a memorised programme note).

### Question 25

Overall, this was the least well answered essay question. Although many students had a good idea of what might make suitable songs for examination for their social or political content (and there was a broad selection, featuring all the named artists), the most common failing was an inability to discuss them in suitable analytical detail. The artists and band that featured most regularly were:

- Joni Mitchell (with the environmental message of ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ being an obvious recommendation)
- Stevie Wonder (with ‘Living for the City’ providing perhaps the most compelling social commentary)
- Muse (various anti-authoritarian songs)
- Beyoncé (much material relating to female empowerment).

### Question 26

The question allowed for a range of contrasting emotional states as depicted in music to be explored and there was a wide spectrum of marks. The most popular subjects for discussion included:

- the ‘Married Life’ sequence from ‘Up’ with music by Michael Giacchino and various scenes from ‘The Incredibles’ by the same composer
- ‘Psycho’ with music by Bernard Herrmann, especially the prelude and the murder scene
- scenes from ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ and ‘Gladiator’ with music by Hans Zimmer.

Answers to this question were often quite detailed on the handling of tempo, but could have done with more specific illustration (perhaps involving simple musical notation) on rhythmic features.

### Question 27

This was, by some way, the most popular question in Section C, thus producing a very broad spread of marks. The most effective answers managed to focus in detail on the topics of instrumentation and texture, linking them carefully to the creation of atmosphere. However, a large number of answers tended towards being a list of features without much analysis or failed to filter out irrelevant information about elements not related to the essay topic.

The most popular subjects for discussion were:

- the ‘Prelude’ and ‘Prologue’ from Sondheim’s ‘Sweeney Todd’
- ‘I’d Give My Life for You’ and ‘Bu Doi’ from Schonberg’s ‘Miss Saigon’
- ‘Lonely Room’ and ‘Oklahoma, OK’ from Rodgers’ ‘Oklahoma!’.

**Question 28**

This question, which asked students to justify an opinion relating to the relative merits of original composition versus reinterpretation, stimulated the highest proportion of effective responses of any in Section C. Many students were able to draw on an impressively detailed recollection of pieces they had studied and write enthusiastically and persuasively in support of their argument. Favourite material included:

- Reinterpretations:
  - Louis Armstrong: 'West End Blues'
  - Charlie Parker: 'Ko-Ko', 'Ornithology'.
  
- Original Compositions:
  - Duke Ellington: 'Black and Tan Fantasy', 'Koko'
  - Miles Davis: 'So What'.

**Question 29**

Only a small minority of students answered this question and the responses tended to bunch in the middle of the mark bands. A common failing was to focus on elements of the folk tradition from which the chosen artists came, rather than their adaptation of western classical or pop music which the question called for. Popular choices (virtually to the exclusion of the others) were:

- Anoushka Shankar
- Bellowhead
- Piazzolla.

**Question 30**

This was another question which required the justification of an opinion (whether tonality is a pre-requisite for accessibility), and it produced the best overall performance in Section C. The most effective answers managed to incorporate discussion of complex phenomena such as Messiaen's modes of limited transposition, various adaptations of tonal function in Shostakovich and Reich's slowly changing non-functional harmony. The most frequently cited works were:

- Messiaen: 'Quartet for the End of Time'
- Reich: 'Music for 18 Musicians'
- Shostakovich: Symphony no.5 and String Quartet no.8.

**Conclusion**

In preparing for Section A, it is important that students get plenty of practice in answering 10-mark questions on unfamiliar excerpts of music under timed conditions and that they work on their perception of pitch-related features such as intervals and chords.

The slight improvement in answers to Section B is an encouraging sign, but there is room for students to develop a more secure grasp of technical terms and harmony.

In Section C, the level of recall of students was often very pleasing; they should be encouraged to develop their ability to form opinions about the music they study and to explore its surrounding contexts.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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