

**A LEVEL**

**Examiners' report**

**MUSIC**

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**H543**

For first teaching in 2016

**H543/03/04 Summer 2023 series**

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## Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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## General overview

In the Composing A and B components, candidates are required to respond to one brief set by OCR, and to respond to a second brief written by the candidate. There is no stipulation that the pieces for Sections 1 and 2 should be contrasted, although, they often were in 2023. The range of styles and idioms presented in 2023 was enormously varied and creative.

In Section 1, candidates were required to choose one of the six set briefs. There is one brief for each of the six Areas of Study. In 2023, Set Brief 5 proved to be very popular with candidates. It appeared to fire the imagination of many candidates with varied and colourful creature characterisations produced, inspired by *The Carnival of the Animals* by Saint-Saëns. Set Brief 6 was also popular with candidates, and gave them the opportunity for some interesting and flamboyant modern ballet pieces. The other set briefs showed imaginative responses too. Set Brief 1 was as popular as ever with many classically inspired quartets presented. The instrumental jazz brief examples were creative in their response to the climate crisis, and responses to Area of Study 2 and the songs of Andy Williams and *The Beautiful Balloon* had integrity and style. There were very few responses to Area of Study 4, Baroque Religious music, but the small number presented were often idiomatic and stylistic.

In Section 2, candidates were required to write their own brief which can be in any style, genre or idiom. Ideas were varied and often creative. Candidates chose either styles with which they already had an affinity or chose new genres to explore. Some pieces explored fusion ideas and others were experimental. This section of the component allows candidates complete freedom to express familiar and unfamiliar challenges.

In Section 3, which was completed only by candidates enrolled in Composing A, candidates were required to write three short exercises which need to be focused in area of study and the chosen element. Chorales, Minimalism and Romantic textures were popular with candidates this year.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• responded to the Brief imaginatively and clearly, using the information given</li> <li>• showed a sense of overview and structure</li> <li>• used strong melodic and harmonic materials</li> <li>• developed the materials in a consistent way</li> <li>• demonstrated consistent handling of texture</li> <li>• demonstrated a definitive sense of style</li> <li>• generated colourful and idiomatically nuanced realisations, using stylistic integration of dynamics, articulations and tempo control</li> <li>• wrote a concise, detailed and imaginative brief for Section 2</li> <li>• focused on one chosen area of study and in one chosen element for Section 3</li> <li>• wrote concise, characterful and stylistically coherent short pieces for Section 3.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• responded to the brief formulaically and did not always use the information given</li> <li>• had a basic structure but no overview of the piece as a whole</li> <li>• used basic melodic and harmonic ideas</li> <li>• showed little sense of development of ideas, or offered many ideas with little cohesion between them</li> <li>• offered inconsistent textural management</li> <li>• used ideas lacking in individual character and style</li> <li>• produced bland realisations with little stylistic integration of articulation, dynamic shaping, or tempo control</li> <li>• did not include a concise brief, writing instead long descriptions for Section 2</li> <li>• wrote a brief that was concise but lacked detail and imagination for Section 2</li> </ul>

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• did not choose one area of study or one focus element, but instead wrote in three different styles and with three focus elements for Section 3</li> <li>• wrote overly long pieces or pieces which did not demonstrate stylistic cohesion for Section 3.</li> </ul>

## Most common causes of centres not passing

Candidates who did less well wrote pieces which were basic in ideas and had little sense of development. The compositions were generally missing a sense of individual character, structural overview together with lacking control of the musical elements.

## Common misconceptions

### The Candidate brief

The candidate brief should ideally be in a similar format to those set by OCR for Section 1. Centres are still submitting overly long pieces of prose which might include elements such as the whole thought process, inspirations, descriptions of the piece and descriptions of the composition process in lieu of a brief. This limits access to the 5 marks available for the brief. The brief should be written before the piece is composed, be concise and include elements of style, instrumentation, length, performers, occasion and venue.

Briefs which were written in retrospect of the piece being written, also limit access to the full range of marks.

If the brief was unfocused, this also limited access to the full range of marks available in the criterion, 'Response to the Brief'. If there are no clear musical intentions of style, genre or idiom, then examiners are not able to determine what the candidate had set out to achieve, thus limiting marks in this criterion.

Candidates should not use a very similar wording and idea to the OCR set briefs within the same submission, nor should they use past OCR set briefs verbatim.

However, candidates are not discouraged from playing to their strengths, and can if they wish, produce two pieces of work from the same area of study.

### Realisations

The realisation is an important part of the submission, as this alone is used to examine the pieces. The submitted scores, and descriptions in lieu of a score, are used purely as evidence for the realisation and as such are not given marks. However, it is important that the recorded realisation *and* the score or description, reflect the intentions of the candidate in as detailed manner as possible. When using electronic submissions, candidates are encouraged to use software manipulation to achieve a realisation which has the subtleties of idiomatic expression, tempo and articulation that might be achieved in a live performance.

There are many widely available products on the market to be able to do this and many of them are free. Many recordings are submitted with very basic detail and include only occasional dynamic markings and articulations. They may have included change of tempo and ritenutos, but not attempted to realise these in the recording. For example, candidates often write romantic pieces with well thought through changes of character but have not realised the unidiomatic consequence of the piece being sustained at an uncharacteristically constant tempo.

Candidates who submit live recordings are conversely encouraged to include in the score, the detail discussed and realised in the recording process by the performers. Similarly, where jazz improvisations are used, unless these are verified as being played by the candidate, they need to be written out or described in the submission. Although it is accepted that this it is not conventional jazz practice to have written out or described improvisations, in the case of the examination process, it is an important inclusion to help examiners mark the compositions fairly.

### Section 3

There were several examples in 2023 of candidates presenting incorrect submissions. The main misunderstanding was in the choice of Area of Study. Candidates need to present three pieces from one Area of Study and with one chosen element. Another misconception was in the focus area. Candidates should choose only one from Pitch Organisation, Rhythm and Metre, or Texture, and should write all three pieces with that one focus. The pieces should be up to 45 seconds in length.

### Avoiding potential malpractice

Do not use OCR set briefs verbatim.

Avoid extensive lifting of ideas from other works, which could be interpreted as plagiarism.

Encourage candidates to direct recordings of their own works, particularly when working with professional players, so that their own interpretive ideas manifest themselves in the realisation and score, and not solely those of the players.

### Additional comments

It would be extremely beneficial and time saving if centres could instigate a system whereby candidates check their own submissions in full before submitting. There were various missing items such as briefs, scores and CCS this year. In addition, and more importantly, the recordings need to be listened to from beginning to end to make sure that they are not corrupted, or half finished.

Finally, a reminder that Sibelius files are not a suitable form of submission. Scores must be submitted in PDF form and recordings as sound files in a format playable on any standard PC/Laptop. We cannot guarantee that examiners have the Sibelius (or any other notation) software.

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