

GCSE (9–1)

Moderators' report

MUSIC

J536

For first teaching in 2016

J536/01/02 Summer 2023 series

Contents

Introduction	3
Online courses	3
General overview	4
Performance	5
Composition	7
Common misconceptions	10
Avoiding potential malpractice	11
Helpful resources	12
Additional comments	13

Introduction

Our moderators' 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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We have created online courses to build your confidence in delivering, marking and administering internal assessment for our qualifications. Courses are available for Cambridge Nationals, GCSE, A Level and Cambridge Technicals (2016).

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All teachers delivering our redeveloped Cambridge Nationals suite from September 2022 are asked to complete the Essentials for the NEA course, which describes how to guide and support your students. You'll receive a certificate which you should retain.

Following this you can also complete a subject-specific Focus on Internal Assessment course for your individual Cambridge Nationals qualification, covering marking and delivery.

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General overview

The Integrated Portfolio is all about building on the individual musical skills and interests of the candidates. The NEA content (a solo performance and a composition in a style chosen by the candidate) remains constant year on year, as a result of which there is very little in the way of new insight that can be added in this report that hasn't already been stated in previous years. The 2022 moderation report contained advice for centres on a range of issues to help rectify some misunderstandings of the specification, and to suggest ways of improving the outcomes of their candidates. Many of these misunderstandings were again evident this year but not necessarily in the same centres. This report therefore has some considerable similarities to the one written for the 2022 examination series, and it is hoped that this will support newer and less experienced centres in improving the outcomes of their candidates.

Once again, the quality of musicianship that was often achieved by many candidates in centres across the country was impressive. Most centres assess their candidates accurately and realistically. There remains a minority of centres where the assessment of work is generous and, in some cases, this is quite significant. In most cases, performances were assessed more accurately than compositions.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rehearsed performance pieces diligently, with a combined focus on accuracy, and expression, resulting in a high standard of musicality • composed pieces that demonstrated a clear understanding and application of well taught compositional devices, such as the use of contrasting keys, melodic extension, variation, and development, and a harmonic awareness of phrasing and cadences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • performed pieces that were too difficult for them, resulting in frequent errors and hesitations • composed pieces that were over dependent on the repetition of short chord patterns, simple riffs, and chord note based melodic ideas. This inevitably resulted in a lack of contrast and limited development of the compositional material.

Performance

The overwhelming majority of centres continue to prepare their candidates thoroughly for this element of the unit. A wide range of instruments and repertoire is in evidence covering a breadth of cultures and genres. As in previous years vocalists and pianists are strongly represented whilst orchestral instruments are increasingly rare. There is also a smattering of vocalists and instrumentalists performing culturally specific repertoire from around the world. Technology based performances are also regularly heard, thus enabling candidates with less “traditional” performing skills to still achieve highly.

Some candidates perform work prepared for their grade instrumental examinations, whilst others prefer to focus on learning to perform music that they have enjoyed listening to. The latter category often applies to vocalists, drum kit and guitarists. However, for this category of candidate, there was frequent use of repertoire from the syllabi of the Rock School and Trinity College Rock and Pop exams in this session. This enables learners of instruments associated with the rock and pop genre to build their instrumental technique appropriately.

Key point out call: accuracy of performance assessment

Overall, the assessment of performance was broadly accurate in a good majority of centres. Where leniency did occur, this was often because a performance was placed in the 10 – 12 mark criteria band for both “Technical Control and Fluency” and “Expression and Interpretation”, when intonation and technique weren’t completely secure, and the delivery lacked attention to the nuances of the score. This inevitably resulted in a lack of musicality which was especially noticeable in vocal submissions.

Other rock-based performances also lacked attention to the musical detail of the piece, often because the chosen performance piece lacked the opportunity to show the level of musicality required to justify a top criteria band mark.

These summary comments for the mark bands provide some added context to the actual marking criteria and should be used as an additional check on the assessment outcomes of candidates.

Marks	Descriptor – Technical Control and Fluency (Both units)
10 - 12	A good to excellent Year 11 performer – musically accurate and confident, showing strong technique.
7 - 9	Generally, keeps going, but there is evidence of weak technique, resulting in a poor tone and performing errors. Persistent intonation issues, if applicable.
4 - 6	Some fluency, but some significant errors and hesitations. Weak technique.
1 - 3	A struggling performer. Poor technique and regular significant inaccuracies.

Marks	Descriptor – Expression and Interpretation (Unit 01/02)
10 - 12	Musical and stylish – high level of musical detail applied.
7 - 9	Some musical detail evident, but not consistently so – some moments of style
4 - 6	Limited attention to musical detail – mainly just notes.
1 - 3	Very little attempt to apply musical detail – often linked to a struggling performer.

Assessment for learning



In particular, a drum kit performance of a rock or pop piece will often lack the opportunity to show dynamic control, so opportunities should be created within the performance to show this, for example with changes of dynamics between the verse and chorus.

Rock guitarists should also take note of this advice.

Technology based performances are a popular option in a small but significant number of centres. The majority of these come under the heading of Sequencing, but there are also the occasional DJ and pedal looped performances submitted.

Key point out call: live input to a sequenced performance

Centres are reminded that a sequenced performance should contain an element of “live control” in the final recording. This could include performing one of the parts live in the final mix or producing a live mix of the final recording. Assessors are reminded to state the live element of a sequenced performance on the Candidate Assessment Form.

A particularly successful approach heard this year was a live vocal performance of a song over an accompaniment track that the candidate had sequenced themselves.

The provision of performance scores is generally good, with centres or candidates purchasing and submitting the scores as required. Although potentially expensive, this is not an unreasonable expectation, as instrumental and vocal grade examinations require the purchase of specific repertoire. Therefore, where performances are submitted without adequate notation, moderators are required to request this. This is an Ofqual requirement for this specification that OCR are required to uphold, in common with the GCSE Music specifications offered by the other examination boards.

OCR are aware that many learners lean heavily on online tutorials when developing their performance skills. It is also recognised that within certain genres of music, the score will only be a guide to the performer's intention. Nevertheless, some form of supporting evidence of the performer's intention must be provided, and this should normally be a notated score.

A lyric sheet (with or without chords) is simply not an acceptable score for a vocalist.

Key point out call: The use of reference tracks in lieu of scores

As a result of the Ofqual guidance, OCR expect reference tracks to be only provided as a last resort. Moderators were frequently able to find scores available online (usually free) for performance pieces that centres had submitted with only a reference track.

Inevitably, there may be a cost implication to the procurement of certain scores. Therefore, an alternative to this is to provide screen shots of sample pages from commercial sites, provided that there is enough of the score available to make a judgment on the accuracy of the work submitted. The Musecore website has a huge range of material available for a reasonable monthly fee. This frequently contains very recent releases.

Where YouTube (or other web links) are provided, **they should be provided as a hyperlink via an online document or email.** Some moderators were given lists of lengthy URLs to type in manually. Not only is this time consuming, but it is also prone to errors, resulting in an inability to access the track.

Composition

Once again composition work was submitted that encompassed all the mark criteria bands. At the top end of the mark range there were many examples of high quality work, across a range of genres such as popular songs, rhapsodic piano solos, orchestral film scores, big bands, classical style chamber ensembles, and contemporary dance style tracks that fully exploited the potential of the complex composition software that is now available in many centres.

Assessment for learning



Often the defining factor for a composition to justify assessment in the top criteria mark band is the quality of the melodic writing, in relation to the richness of the accompanying harmonic language. The importance of quality melody lines, and the development of these within the piece is a skill for learners to work on as part of their learning in composition lessons.

Whilst teachers will all have their favored methods of teaching composition skills, it is always worth starting with shorter composition exercises that focus on writing structured melodies that fit a given chord pattern, before encouraging learners to diversify into exploring their own creative preferences.

In this session it was noticeable that candidates were often incorporating their performance skills into their compositions by writing compositions that included a significant part for their solo instrument. This is something that makes a lot of sense as it is easier for a learner to explore and create their compositional ideas on an instrument with which they feel confident as a performer.

Key point call out: Assessment of Composition

Many centres overmarked the compositions of their learners, sometimes with considerable leniency. As noted in last year's report, there is something of a trend towards riff-based compositions that focus on developing timbre and texture, rather than melody and harmony. The restricting factor in the assessment of these types of pieces is the simplicity of the harmonic structure (often just four chords), and the lack of melodic complexity in the riffs, as they are just short repetitive motifs. Assessors frequently marked this type of work very generously. In reality, this type of work is unlikely to justify a mark beyond the criteria of the 16 – 20 mark band.

These summary comments describing the global characteristics of the mark bands are designed to support the correct application of the mark criteria in the specification. The summary comment can be used to place the composition in the most appropriate mark band, before using the descriptors to fine tune the mark within the band.

01/02 mark band	03/04 mark band	Holistic descriptor
26 – 30	21 – 24	Musically accomplished and stylish; excellent development of ideas
21 – 25	17 – 20	Musically successful; good musical understanding shown through the development of ideas
16 – 20	13 – 16	Development of ideas shows musical understanding, but the ideas lack imagination. For example, the melodies and harmonies work, but feel predictable – constructed rather than imaginative
11 – 15	9 – 12	Mostly successful piece, but lacking extension of ideas – perhaps some sections are better than others
6 – 10	5 – 8	Musically simple piece – short (or excessively long and meandering)
1 – 5	1 – 4	No real success – melodies and harmonies clash; awkward length phrases, etc.

Composition score evidence is generally very good, and this is something that centres have improved on during the past two examination sessions. Scores were presented in a multitude of formats including traditionally notated scores, PowerPoint presentations, annotated screenshots, tabular documents, and written accounts. The most successful scores in any format provide a **chronological description of the musical content** of the piece, that includes the structure, the chords, textural descriptions, timbral variations, dynamics, and development of the thematic material.

OCR support



Sometimes a written account can veer towards being an evaluation of the outcome of the music rather than a detailed description of the musical content.

There are examples of a range of score presentations contained within the [candidate style answers resource](#).

Another continuing concern occasionally noted in this session was the role of additional performers in the performance of a learner's composition. Whilst additional performers are permitted to assist with the recording of a learner's composition, teachers need to be very clear about how these additional performers learn their parts. In short, the parts need to be notated/written by the learner, and no enhancement of the given part can take place. **A note on the assessment form stating that verbal instructions were given to the other performers is not sufficient evidence.**

Some centres met these conditions extremely well indeed and are to be commended upon this. It must be understood that this requirement is part of ensuring that all learner's receive a mark that is a fair and accurate representation of the standard of their work.

Key point call out: the use of additional performers to realise a candidate composition

A chord accompaniment provided as chord symbols should be played as block chords, once per bar, unless there are additional annotations, or specific notation, supplied to the moderator as part of the score that has been written by the learner.

A learner may choose to write a song but lack the vocal quality to do their ideas justice. In this case, the vocal line can be composed and recorded on a Keyboard by the learner for the additional vocalist to learn, or a sung version of the vocal line of the song could be recorded by the learner to show the intention. This evidence should be provided to the moderator.

Instructions to additional performers to "improvise" (for example in a Drum kit part, or an instrumental interlude) can't be credited as part of the learner's assessment.

Many learners benefit from the availability of composition software within their centres, such as Garageband, Logic, Ableton, etc. These are excellent tools for supporting the development of composition skills.

It has long been accepted that the pre composed sample loops available within many of these programmes should not be used as the basis of a GCSE composition, and that the use of these in any part of the composition should be declared and reflected in the assessment.

As software becomes more sophisticated, it is possible to generate stylish drum kit accompaniments and automated chord textures very easily within some of these programmes.

Key point call out: use of automated functions within composition software

The use of these functions must also be declared on the assessment form. Learners who create and develop their own textural accompaniments should receive the credit due for this, and compositions that are based on auto-generated accompaniment and drum patterns need to be assessed accordingly.

Common misconceptions

Misconception – assessing two or more performances for the same candidate



This situation arises when a learner needs to perform more than one piece to meet the minimum time requirements of the specification.

Although the two pieces do not need to be recorded in one take, they should be assessed as a whole performance. If the difficulty levels of the two pieces are different, the difficulty level of the **easier** piece applies to the whole performance.

Centres are reminded that it is acceptable to add additional repeated sections to a piece of music to extend its duration provided this is not taken to excess.

Misconception – assessing pieces with a difficulty mark of 1 or 2



If a learner is performing a piece with a difficulty level of 1 or 2, the upper mark criteria band of 10 – 12 is NOT available for “Technical Control and Fluency” and “Expression and Interpretation”.

Therefore, the maximum mark available for the performance of an easier piece is $9 + 9 + 2 = 20$.

Misconception – the assessment of monophonic and rhythm only compositions



If a learner is performing a piece with a difficulty level of 1 or 2, the upper mark criteria band of 10 – 12 is NOT available for “Technical Control and Fluency” and “Expression and Interpretation”.

Therefore, the maximum mark available for the performance of an easier piece is $9 + 9 + 2 = 20$.

Misconception



Theme and Variation based compositions, where the learner uses a pre-existing theme, should be considered carefully, as the melodic material and often the harmony too, is pre-determined; this severely restricts the compositional input of the learner.

Writing a Theme and Variations using the learners' own theme is likely to show a higher degree of musicality.

Avoiding potential malpractice

All NEA should be properly validated. Performance recordings should be carried out under the direct supervision of the teacher. Regarding composition work, centres need to be mindful of plagiarism and excessive teacher input. The specification contains detailed guidance under Section 4d: Admin of non-exam assessment.

The NEA composition process of the learners must therefore be carefully monitored and supervised. Plagiarism can occur when a learner tries to draw influences from pieces they have performed, or sometimes heard, and it can happen almost subconsciously.

Key point call out: supervision of the composition process

Work should only be undertaken in the classroom, and the teacher is strongly advised to regularly listen in on the progress of the learner's composition, and to make notes, so that the evolution of the composition can be traced and understood.

Learners will also ask for feedback. Ask questions to the learner about the work to draw attention to areas of the composition that need refining. However, the teacher should not offer solutions or suggest alternative ideas.

Helpful resources

Candidate exemplar work from the [2018](#) and the [2019](#) examination sessions is available.

[Exemplar composition work](#) is a useful booklet that provides examples of acceptable formats for the submission of composition scores.

For free online courses to support marking and moderation sign into [My Cambridge](#) and click OCR Train. If you need a login, ask your exams officer. There is an online training resource entitled “NEA support for teachers” to support the moderation and assessment of the Music specification. Exemplar assessments and commentaries of compositions and performances are provided, and there is the opportunity to assess the exemplar materials before the actual mark awarded is revealed.

The website <https://musescore.com> is a constantly evolving library of arrangements and scores. Arrangements of newly released popular songs quickly appear on this site, often in “easy play” versions which are accessible to learners. A monthly subscription is however required.

The website <https://sheetmusic-free.com> has a vast library of popular music. There is no charge for downloads, but a donation is requested, but not compulsory.

[YouTube](#) contains a wealth of backing tracks for popular songs. Carefully worded searches will often also turn up arrangements of classic pop and rock songs that are “minus drums”, “minus Bass” or “minus Lead Guitar” for learners to work with. A range of online tutorials for Keyboard players are also plentiful, and these are regularly updated.

The Principal Moderator is delivering an online professional development session on approaches to the teaching and assessment of the NEA element of the specification. This will take place in the Autumn term, 2023, and is bookable from the [professional development hub](#).

The OCR Music Subject Advisor, Marie Bessant is readily available to answer queries and provide help to centres. Please contact her on music@ocr.org.uk

Additional comments

The remainder of this report relates to the administration of the NEA.

In this examination session, there has been a continuation of the move away from postal moderation, to uploading the work onto the Repository. Some centres find the process quite arduous and time consuming. The length of time the work takes to upload can be significantly reduced if audio files are converted to MP3 format. "WAV" files in particular end up being quite large in comparison. In this session too, there was an increase in the number of mp4 and .mov video uploaded. These large files take a substantial time to download for moderators, let alone upload, so centres should always consider whether a video file is likely to add anything to the value of the performance being assessed. In virtually all cases, an audio file is all that is required.

Some centres sent Sibelius files in lieu of composition recordings. Whilst the intention was undoubtedly to be helpful, as it would enable a moderator to view the score and hear the audio, this is not acceptable. Moderators can't be expected to have all the different types of software to open whatever version of a composition or software file is uploaded or sent. Converting work to an audio file is quick and easy, and the score needs to be printed or uploaded in a standard format (pdf, ppt, jpg or word).

The process of uploading work to the Repository can also be made a lot more straightforward, if the files are labelled correctly. Please ensure that each one is saved with the following format: 4 digit candidate number followed by an underscore, followed by any other text e.g. "1001_solo performance" or "1001_composition score" etc. [Detailed instructions are contained here](#) for future reference.

Most centres, both postal and Repository, were very conscientious in the preparation and labelling of the work for moderation. This was appreciated by the moderators.

The use of the interactive pdf Candidate Assessment Form as a downloadable document from the website is recommended, as it correctly totals the candidate mark as you fill in the detail. Clerical errors, where marks had been incorrectly totalled, or incorrectly transcribed onto the interchange were quite frequently discovered amongst the submissions, usually as a result of not using the online form.

The quality of recordings from centres was generally very good. However, there were a significant minority of cases where background chatter and general ambient noise was present on the candidate recordings. Besides being a distraction to the moderation process, this is unlikely to be an environment that enables a learner to achieve their best work. Centres might consider requesting specifically timetabled examination recording slots within the school day, in the approach to the end of the Easter term of Year 11. This would provide learners with a quiet environment that enables them to focus fully on delivering their best possible performance.

Most candidates met the minimum time duration of 4 minutes for performing and 3 minutes for composing. Where this was not the case for performing, a "Minimum Time Duration" form should have been returned to OCR.

OCR support



Centres are advised to regularly check the website for updates.

For regular updates on the Music specification direct to you by email, [register here](#).

Thank you for your continued commitment to the OCR GCSE Music specification.

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