

GCSE (9–1)

Moderators' report

MUSIC

J536

For first teaching in 2016

J536/03/04 Summer 2023 series

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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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General overview

After a covid enforced break, this unit returned to the GCSE Music specification to be assessed for the first time since the June 2019 examination series. The Practical Component contains two elements of NEA, the first of which is all about performing with others. The second element requires candidates to compose music to a specific brief based on a chosen Area of Study from the specification, along with a specific stimulus to incorporate into the musical fabric of the composition. The majority of the stimuli are musically specific in that they require the use and development of a specific rhythmic phrase, note pattern or chord sequence. Two of the remaining stimuli (the image and the short story) are designed to be used as the inspirational starting point for the composition with candidates having to create their piece around the mood suggested by the stimuli. The development of the stimulus is crucial to the "Relationship to the Brief" mark, so due consideration should be given to this as the composition is refined and developed over time. Finally, the intention of the words stimulus is to provide a starting point for lyrics to a song. This links most obviously to an AOS5 composition, but for this session the words were permissible for AOS3 and AOS4 as well.

This report should be read in conjunction with the one for the Unit 01/02 Integrated Portfolio, as there is some crossover between the two units.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rehearsed ensemble performance pieces diligently, with a combined focus on accuracy, and expression, resulting in a high standard of musical awareness of the contribution made by the candidate's part to the quality of the musical outcome of the ensemble • 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 • gave due consideration to the conventions of the chosen area of study • ensured that the chosen stimulus was used and developed as the focus of the musical content of the entire composition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • performed pieces that were too difficult for them, resulting in frequent errors and hesitations that were disruptive to the musical quality of the ensemble • 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 • paid little regard to the conventions of the chosen area of study • made limited use of the chosen stimulus in the context of their overall composition.

Performance

This element of the unit provides a marvellous opportunity for candidates in a GCSE Music class to enjoy rehearsing together towards a common goal, whilst supporting each other in the preparation of their NEA. Many centres take full advantage of this and candidate based ensembles of all standards were a common occurrence in the work submitted. Some candidate ensembles took on challenging pieces of repertoire; this included string quartets by classical composers, brass band pieces, swing band classics complete with improvisations, and complex “classical” style a capella vocal ensembles. Many rock bands, perhaps surprisingly, favoured repertoire from the classic rock of bands such as Queen and Guns and Roses, whilst the contemporary scene was also well represented, in particular by vocalists.

Due to the nature of the ensembles (in that they often featured work on songs candidates had learned by ear), the scores provided sometimes lacked the necessary detail of the individual parts played by the candidates. The same rules apply as for the scores of solo performing and OCR is open to creative ways of providing the necessary information for moderators.

In some ensembles, it was difficult to pick out the ensemble line being assessed, perhaps due to the circumstances of the recording (for example, from the back of the Hall in a school concert). The importance of recording in a controlled environment with well-placed recording equipment is important, so as not to disadvantage the candidate.

Key point out call: identifying parts in an ensemble

Centres are reminded of the need to state which part the candidate is performing, either on the Candidate Assessment Form, or on the score itself. There were countless examples of this information not being immediately available. For example, although a centre may easily be able to identify the difference between two vocalists from the sound of their voice, it is not so easy for a moderator who does not know the candidates.

It may sometimes be helpful to provide video recordings of an ensemble of multiple instrumentalists playing similar sounding instruments (for example in a steel band or keyboard ensemble) so that the candidate part can be properly identified, and the playing technique observed.

Ensemble performance has many similarities to the requirements of the solo performance unit and the assessment criteria therefore have a lot in common. One crucial difference to note is that the performance must include at least a minute of interaction between two or more performers, playing or singing an independent line.

Key point out call: OCR's definition of an ensemble and how this affects the assessment

An ensemble is defined by OCR as a piece performed by two or more live musicians. Ideally an ensemble for two players should be a duet of two equal instruments or voices, but a lead instrument or voice accompanied by a piano is also accepted. By some definitions this might be classed as a solo and accompaniment; therefore, when awarding the mark for “Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble Awareness”, assessors should take account of the extent to which the soloist is genuinely interacting with the accompaniment, or indeed take note as to whether the accompanist is actually leading the soloist in dynamic and tempo adjustments. This is especially important if the accompaniment part is not played by another candidate.

Misconception



Centres are reminded that two live singers singing alternate sections of a song to a backing track is not an ensemble. The minute of ensemble playing refers to the actual time the two live singers are performing an independent line simultaneously.

Key point out call: accuracy of ensemble assessment

As with Unit 01/02, the assessment of performance was broadly accurate in a good majority of centres. Where leniency did occur, this was often against the “Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble Awareness” criteria, where assessors had not fully considered the quality of the candidate’s contribution to the ensemble. A mark in the 10 – 12 mark band requires both excellent attention to the musical detail of the candidate’s part alongside a high level of ensemble awareness in regard to the balance and cohesion of the ensemble as a whole.

Provided here are some additional band descriptors to provide added context to the marking criteria of this aspect of the assessment.

Marks	Descriptor – Technical Control and Fluency (Both units)
10 - 12	Musical and stylish; high level of ensemble awareness evident.
7 – 9	Some musical detail; co-ordinates/fits well with other performer(s).
4 - 6	Limited attention to musical detail; Awareness of other performer(s), but significant problems with balance and interaction.
1 – 3	Little attempt at musical detail – frequently out of time with other performer(s).

Candidates are urged to tune their instruments properly before completing ensemble recordings as poor intonation does impact on the assessment of the outcome. There were a lot of poorly tuned guitars in the work for this session. This is something that teachers can help with.

Technology based performance remains an alternative in this unit for those candidates with less traditional performing skills. Sequencing was the overwhelmingly popular option for those candidates who took this route. The defining feature when assessing this work needs to be the musicality of the outcome, which is not necessarily related to the complexity of the piece being realised. A high quality sequenced performance shows all the musicality of a live performer. As with Unit 01/02, an element of live input is required during the final recording, and this information should be provided to the moderator.

Composition

The assessment of composition was prone to leniency. Writing to the brief is an important part of this unit. The core criteria mark bands are the same as those used for the Unit 01/02 compositions, but the marking bands are narrower to allow for an extra six marks to be allocated to the successful application of the brief and chosen stimulus. Compositions should initially be marked against the core criteria to assess the quality of the musical understanding evident within the work. The Relationship to the Brief (RTB) mark is then considered separately, regarding how successfully the candidate has met the requirements of the genre of the area of study, and the degree to which the stimulus has been incorporated into the composition. These six marks can make a substantial difference to the mark a composition receives. Candidates should therefore be made aware of the expectations for each brief before making their choice. Careful note should be taken of the stimuli that can be linked to each of the briefs, as this will change from session to session.

Area of Study 4 compositions were by far the most popular option for this series. Whilst the two most chosen stimuli were the rainbow image and the short story, there were other candidates who took the opportunity to develop their own story line, which allowed them to make use of one of the other stimuli. The 4/4 rhythm pattern found its way into a surprising number of these compositions as a military style snare drum pattern accompanying the build up to a battle scene.

The purpose of the Film Music Area of Study 4 is to compose a piece that creates an atmosphere or tells a story. There were some stunning pieces of work that completely succeeded in this respect. There were also a significant number of compositions that lost sight of the need to create and develop musical ideas, which is essential when it comes to justifying marks in the upper core criteria mark bands. For example, pieces that just create an atmosphere through the use of chords played on “exotic” synthesiser pad timbres are not musically complex, however suitably “atmospheric” they sound, and should be assessed accordingly.

The short story was frequently used. Most candidates successfully created the calm and peaceful mood required for the opening of the piece. More successful compositions evolved the themes of the opening material to depict the gradually increasing rustling of the leaves on the trees, before further developing their ideas to create the extension to the storyline. Less successful compositions began a completely new section for each event.

Assessment for learning



Film music can be episodic by its nature, as it flits from scene to scene describing the progression of the story. This can result in a composition that lacks overall cohesion, as it ends up sounding like several short unrelated ideas.

In order to access the highest mark bands, more able candidates should be taught to write extended melodic lines, repetitions of which develop melodically, harmonically and timbrally to reflect the changing moods of the story.

Key point out call: extending the 'short story' stimulus appropriately

For Area of Study 4, the intention is that the "short story" stimulus should be extended with the candidate's own events. The expectation is that the candidate's extended story should be provided as part of the supporting documentation, and this was not always the case.

Where the extension to the story was clearly described and signposted, the "Relationship to the Brief" mark was easy to justify.

Whilst most of the storyline extensions made good sense in the context of the starting stimulus provided, there were an isolated few that could best be described as ridiculous, and this was ultimately detrimental to the quality of the composition.

There was a trend observed in several centres towards writing an AOS4 composition that had been inspired by a scene or trailer from various movies. Some centres provided these scenes for reference. Whilst the composition undoubtedly suited the mood of the film clip suggested, the ultimate requirement for the core criteria marks is that the candidate should write a quality composition, and many of the compositions were actually quite basic. Assessors should always consider the quality of the music without reference to any accompanying imagery. The "Relationship to the Brief" mark is where this element comes into play.

Key point out call: interpreting the image successfully

The rainbow image was a popular source of inspiration for both Area of Study 4 and 5 compositions, as well as some Area of Study 3 compositions too. It's fair to say that some of the connections to the image were very tenuous. To justify a higher "Relationship to the Brief" (RTB) mark, the features of the image (the dark sky, the brightly coloured rainbow, and the tall trees) needed to be reflected in the music. Candidates who provided a succinct description of how they had interpreted the image helped to justify a higher RTB mark from their assessor.

Titles such as the "The Melancholy Rainbow" or "The Storm" were not necessarily sufficient justification on their own, as the composition needed to do more than create a melancholy mood, a stormy mood, or a peaceful scene. This is because the resulting composition could fit any number of images.

Successful AOS4 interpretations explained how the specific detail of the image was reflected in the musical content. Another successful approach was to imagine and describe through music, the scene leading up to the appearance of the rainbow.

In Area of Study 5, successful interpretations incorporated key elements of the image into the lyrics of the song.

Misconception – the definition of a 'song'



One common misconception for this series was the definition of a song in AOS5. The brief asked candidates to “Create a popular song....” It was expected that a song should have lyrics. Instrumental pieces in a popular style were not therefore able to access the full six marks for the “Relationship to the Brief”. Usually this was set at a mark of three, provided that one of the stimuli had been used as the basis of the composition.

This same expectation was set out in the Principal Moderator’s report of 2019 when this unit was last examined. If the 2024 composition briefs require a song, the same definition will be applied.

The most used stimulus for Area of Study 5 was the chord sequence, closely followed by the set of words. There were also candidates who used the Note Pattern and Rhythm Phrase. Some compositions consisted of a very impressive ICT production with full attention given to the quality of the accompaniment and production elements as well as the melodic ideas. There were some equally effective acoustic AOS5 compositions recorded live by the candidate. Both types of composition achieve well if the musical understanding is evident and of a high quality.

Area of Study 2 compositions were less common, with candidates usually choosing one of the note patterns. There were a lot of very successful AOS2 compositions that completely embraced the concept of writing for a solo instrument with an effective accompaniment. Some enterprising candidates went as far as to include a cadenza as well in true concerto style.

Relatively few Area of Study 3 compositions were submitted. The most common stimulus here was the 4/4 rhythmic phrase which formed a useful starting point for Samba and African Drumming compositions. Pleasingly, most of these predominantly rhythmic genre compositions also included melodic and harmonic interest which enabled these candidates to demonstrate their musical understanding of the complete range of musical elements.

The 5/8 rhythmic phrase was used successfully by some candidates to create compositions with a real sense of individuality in both AOS2 and AOS3.

Assessment for learning: use of the stimulus



The chosen stimulus should be extended and developed to access the higher marks. Repetition of the same rhythmic phrase, note pattern or even the chord sequence for the entire piece is likely to be a restricting factor on the assessment outcome.

Using the stimulus just once, and then moving straight on to something different will particularly affect the RTB mark. The stimulus should therefore be clearly used as the starting point for a **significant section** of the composition – it helps to indicate where the stimulus has been used in the composition if it is not immediately obvious.

The rhythmic phrase can be used rhythmically as a percussion part, or as the rhythm of a melodic phrase. Use of the rhythm as an ostinato for long sections of the piece, or as an afterthought in a drum kit part is likely to restrict the assessment outcome. The musical ideas need to develop, and then return.

The chord sequence should be used accurately, and in the right order as the starting point: there are only four of them. In this session, the seventh in the A7 chord was often missed.

Both the note patterns and the rhythmic phrase should be used in the correct order as the starting point. They can of course be developed as the piece progresses.

The image can be open to the widest of interpretations. Candidates are advised to provide a supporting written statement explaining how their music has interpreted the specific features of the image provided.

For the short story, candidates should create the musical atmosphere based on the given text, and then develop the story and music as they see fit. There will usually be at least two “events” provided in the given short story, for which the candidate will be required to suggest a definite change of musical mood, before moving onto their own extension. As stated earlier in the report, a description of the extended story should be provided with the score.

The set of words can be split into single lines, two couplets or used in one chunk. They are best used as the start of a verse, or in the chorus. Their use in the Bridge section only is a bit tenuous. Additional lyrics should continue the character or theme of the given lyrics to justify a higher RTB mark.

The character of the set of words are not intended to be used as an “inspiration” for an instrumental piece, or for a song with completely different lyrics.

Avoiding potential malpractice

This has been covered in the moderators' report for Unit 01/02 and there is no additional information to add here.

Helpful resources

This has been covered in the moderators' report for Unit 01/02 and there is no additional information to add here.

Additional comments

This has been covered in the moderators' report for Unit 01/02 and there is no additional information to add here.

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