

Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback Summer 2010

GCE

GCE Music (6MU02) Paper 01 Composing

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General Introduction

The pattern of choices between the four briefs was markedly different this year. This has not in itself made a significant impact on the marks for compositions although the standard is generally higher with 84% of candidates achieving better than half marks and a small rise in the mean mark from 36.7 in 2009 to 37.3 in 2010. This may be accounted for by an improvement in the marks for the sleeve note (see below).

Topic 1 - composing expressively

This was chosen by 46% of the candidates and was by far the most popular option and carried the widest spread of marks.

There was much imaginative work here, covering a wide range of interpretations of the given title, *Life Cycle*. The best work achieved a sense of 'wholeness', to quote the mark scheme, in which ideas were presented coherently and in such a way as to suggest some form of abstract narrative with a convincing opening and close. Many styles were represented, from serialism to big band jazz and although any style is acceptable, some of the jazz compositions had only a distant connection with the brief suggesting that this was the most convenient topic for the candidate rather than an attempt to meet the brief in detail (these jazz composers might usefully have studied Charles Mingus' *Pithecanthropus Erectus*).

As in previous years, harmony was the criterion chosen least often by the examiners, many of whom commented that this was frequently the weaker element in the composition. Part writing tends to be insecure, particularly in cases where the piece is assembled using a computer and where, presumably, the parts are added visually rather than aurally.

Some examiners commented that submissions were often excessively long - over six minutes. Compositions are required to be at least three minutes long and whilst there is no upper limit the demands of sustaining a piece over such an increased length can often prove too much for the candidate so that the piece either rambles, or is too repetitive.

Topic 2 - variations

This was attempted by 14% of the candidates. The opportunity to compose a ground clearly proved more accessible than last year's topic and seems to have attracted some of the weaker candidates since there was a slightly greater group of marks at the bottom end.

Effective part writing - implicit in this task - proved a challenge to many candidates. Many also failed to take full advantage of the brief's encouragement to vary the ground and instead submitted mechanical reworkings of the ground in the bass part, in treatments which often had a strong resemblance to *Pachelbel's canon* or in which the ground was merely the bass line of a pop song. Some examiners commented that sometimes there were not enough notes in the ground, or that it contained many repeated notes, both of which tended to restrict the possibilities of the ground and made the task of realising it harder.

On the other hand, work at the top end was imaginative and gained marks when a creative leap had been taken and in which the candidate had obviously researched the brief and studied a range of compositional models.

Topic 3 - song

At 23% this was second in order of popularity but a distinct drop in last year's choice (40%). Perhaps the topic of war offered fewer models upon which to draw, particularly in terms of popular music. There were, however a number of choral pieces and settings of Wilfred Owen, doubtless Britten-inspired and several imaginative treatments which took the form of a song from a stage musical about war.

Generally, those offering work in a traditional style achieved better than those working in a popular idiom - examiners commented on the lack of textural variety in the backings of popular songs and angular word-settings, both of which have been long-standing faults in popular song writing. It is important to study the mark scheme as well as the brief, as within the mark scheme there are numerous possibilities for reward; structure, instrumentation, melody, harmony and rhythm. The song needs to be secure in most of these criteria, if it is to achieve a high mark.

Topic 4 - Lullaby

There was a great increase (from 5% to 17%) in the uptake of this topic compared with last year. It clearly proved highly popular, attracting some of the popular songwriters away from Topic 3 possibly because they found the implied sentimentality of the title offered a little more emotional scope and a pleasing alternative to the more sombre topic of war.

This topic also attracted a significant number of weaker candidates who had difficulty with the vocal part writing and a frequent misunderstanding of the vocal resources they were writing for. As a result, this topic fell from being the strongest last year. However, it still proved attractive to those candidates with a confident feel for vocal writing and access to competent singers or a centre choir to perform their work.

To sum up, it would seem that the redistribution of topic choices has been the result of the weaker candidates seeking the most agreeable brief. It is worth noting that in these cases marks were lost for much the same reasons as in the past;

- repetitive structures
- basic treatment of resources and textures
- weak harmony
- weak part writing
- angular melodic writing.

The CD Sleeve Note

Marks for the CD sleeve note were much improved, particularly at the lower end of the ability range. Last year 45% achieved better than half marks. This year that figure is 57%.

There was little change at the top - this year, as in last, 15% gained more than 15/20.

However, it was at the bottom end where the change was most striking - last year 15% achieved less than 5/20 but this year that figure reduced to 5%.

The key to high marks in this part of the unit - which carries a third of the total marks - is attention to detail. Examples and locations need to be given and the best work was clearly the result of candidates having researched the brief, chosen their models carefully and related these to their composition with examples and comment.

It was noted by several examiners that many candidates took far too long and provided far too much detail in questions 1 and 2 (which carry 4 marks each) at the expense of question 3 (which carries 12). In such cases full marks were common for the first two questions but only half marks or so for the last one. This is a pity, since there is plenty of time to prepare for this part of the unit; candidates need to make comprehensive notes throughout the year and take the notes with them when they write up their Sleeve Note, allowing plenty of time for question 3.

Administration

Few problems were reported. Some centres continue to submit all their compositions on a single CD. Whilst this is obviously less time-consuming for the teacher, the reason for the one-composition-one-CD rule is that, in the event of a remark for several of the centre's candidates, the centre's work cannot be split. It also makes the centre's work very vulnerable to loss when a single CD is in transit.

A final reminder to centres is to:

- check the Edexcel website regularly for papers and updates
- ensure that the correct brief is being prepared for 2011
- consult the ICE Document for all information relating to this unit, <http://www.edexcel.com/quals/gce/gce08/music/music/Pages/default.aspx>

Statistics

Unit 2 Composing

Grade	Max. Mark	A	B	C	D	E
Raw boundary mark	60	44	39	35	31	27
Uniform boundary mark	90	72	63	54	45	36

Notes

Maximum Mark (Raw): the mark corresponding to the sum total of the marks shown on the mark scheme.

Boundary mark:

The minimum mark required by a candidate to qualify for a given grade.

Grade boundaries may vary from year to year and from subject to subject, depending on the demands of the question paper.

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