

# Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

June 2011

GCE Music  
6MU02 Composing

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## GCE Music 2011

### Examiner's report - 6MU02

There was a small rise in the mean mark from 37.3 in 2010 to 38.2 this year, mainly attributable to a further year-on-year improvement in the quality of the written sleeve notes. Many students seemed to have been better prepared for this part of the unit, although not all the strategies adopted for a comprehensive set of answers to the three questions were successful (see below). The composition part of the unit remains stable, although there was again a shift in the popularity of the briefs.

Many examiners commented on a fall in the standard of scores. Whilst this is no longer an assessed part of the unit, failure to produce a clear score with performance detail – or, worse, a score with significant notational errors - can hinder the examiner's ability to arrive at a well-informed assessment. If a poor score is coupled with a poor recording or a basic Sibelius-generated performance, there is often little evidence that the candidate can handle the chosen instrumental and vocal resources competently and may not, as a consequence, be able to access the higher marks for this criterion.

### The composition briefs

"Composing Expressively" again proved a popular brief, with 54% of the candidates offering a wide range of work ranging from runaway trains and battling Transformers to more predictable glockenspiel lullabies as the children fell asleep followed by drum rolls as the toy soldiers woke up. A problem encountered by many was the difficulty in linking sections together to form a seamless narrative. Many pieces seemed to have been pasted together on the computer and although the ideas themselves were often very evocative, the result was episodic and lacking in flow.

The sleeve notes that accompanied compositions in this particular brief cited surprisingly few of the composers who are known for their illustrative pieces and tone poems - Schumann, Berlioz, Liszt, Grieg, Mussorgsky, R. Strauss, Debussy – and from whom much could have been learnt.

The *fantasia* was third in popularity (16%). Responses to this brief were very mixed and most students took a flexible approach to the task. The best involved development of the chosen melody, extending it imaginatively by creating new material derived from the original. The weaker submissions were often sets of variations in which the candidates were clearly out of their depth with the implied demands of melodic and harmonic development and based their work on an insecure harmonisation of the melody, the misjudgements of which were carried into the variations. This task highlighted the need for students to consider their briefs (and their response to it) more carefully and not take on a task that is out of their technical reach. Not all candidates fulfilled the requirement to submit a copy of their chosen melody.

The song option was second in popularity (25%), an increase over last year. Students were evidently more stimulated by this topic, although given the range of chosen texts, it is possible that some teachers were able to adapt the teaching of the last two years' topics (love and war) so as to embrace this one. Thus, there were many 'letters from the warzone', declarations of love and 'Dear John' letters of rejection. The topic also allowed those with an interest in theatre to exploit the letter device by working it into an 'Act II love duet' or a song performed by a messenger bearing bad news in the manner of a classical drama.

Songwriting is a specialised craft, demanding different skills to those needed to meet the demands made by the other briefs. The trick is to take the formulaic nature of standard song structures and create something with a sense of spontaneity. Sensitive word setting also tends to be overlooked. Whilst the lyrics themselves are not assessed, the ability to follow scansion and underscore the meaning of the text is. Many melodies (and the underlay of the words) felt as if they had been compiled on a computer screen without any sense of the melodic line ever having been sung or of the sense of the words having been fully appreciated.

Just as the sleeve notes for pieces written to the "Composing Expressively" brief showed little evidence of background study of significant composers and their work, so did the sleeve notes that accompanied the songs. Many influences were cited, often songs by a favourite artist or band, but students appeared not to have analysed the influence in any depth or extended their study to other artists and composers.

The brief for the unaccompanied vocal piece was chosen by the fewest candidates (5%). As in previous years it was undertaken by those who felt confident with the medium and who tended to produce good work so that this responses to this brief earned the highest marks of the four.

Many students took the opportunity to set a suitable liturgical text and there were widely differing interpretations of the term 'notable person', ranging from The Deity and the saints to the candidate's relatives.

Lack of textural variety was a feature of the less successful submissions, as was poor part writing. As is the case of the *fantasia*, those candidates who were clearly unable to meet the particular challenges of the brief might have been better advised to choose a different one.

## The sleeve note

There was a further improvement this year in the quality of the answers. 63% achieved better than half marks, compared with 57% in 2010. More achieved better than 16/20 for the three questions: 20% compared with 15% in 2010. Fewer achieved less than 5/20; 4% compared with 5% in 2010.

In question 1, the four marks are available for correctly describing the form (2 marks) and indicating how repetition and contrast are balanced (2 marks). The latter part of the question requires examples and locations.

Question 2 requires four features of interest to be identified, but these need to be *genuine* features of interest. Many candidates fail to earn marks because the features are mundane or lack substantiation. Locations add clarity as do explanations. For example, a statement such as 'I used crotchets' is insufficient in itself, but to write 'I used steady crotchets to suggest the soldiers marching' is worthy of credit.

There was a particular improvement in question 3 this year, perhaps due to the advice given in last year's report on this unit which stressed the need to allow more time to answer it because it carries the most marks.

Not all responses gained high marks, though. A common strategy was to produce a set of bullet points – often exactly 17 in number in the hope of gaining full marks – which listed a wide range of features but which neglected to provide explanation or justification and which therefore failed to gain full credit.

Many candidates produced copious answers and fulfilled the requirement to provide an influence coupled with a source and a location in their own composition, but the influence itself was often very general – for example, 'My cadences [locations given] were influenced by the perfect cadences in the Haydn 'Joke' quartet'. The key word in the question is 'explain', and so what is missing in this answer is the relevance of Haydn's cadences to the candidate's own piece, rather than the simple observation that they have cadences in common.

Other influences were obviously contrived, for example, a set of variations that had a coda 'like the one in Oasis' *Don't Look Back in Anger*'. It is quite understandable that the candidates will rely on their study of the set works and the accessibility of the Anthology to provide material for the sleeve note but it must be borne in mind that the observations made need to have an element of credibility.

## Administration

It has been reported that several large centres persist in recording all their candidates' work on a single CD. Apart from being a specification infringement, this places the submissions at risk if the CD is lost or damaged. Correct labelling of the CD, including a vocal identity on the recording itself, is very important.

There were some isolated cases of centres submitting last year's briefs. It is important both to check the website in September when the briefs for the coming year are released, and to bear in mind that there is no provision for re-sits or resubmissions of last year's work.

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