

Examiners' Report/  
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2012

GCE Music (6MU02)  
Composing

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## GCE Music 2012 Examiners' report - 6MU02

There was a rise in the mean mark from 38.2 to 39.2, the result of a further improvement this year in the sleeve notes. The composition part of the unit remains stable and, overall, 87% of the candidates achieved better than half marks for the compositions (the same percentage as for Unit 5).

In previous years the examiners have recorded marks for each of the composition topics and for the sleeve notes. This year they additionally monitored different musical styles. Three very broad categories were adopted and, in round figures, the proportions of the submissions were 57% classical/tonal, 27% popular/jazz, 16% 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century (eg. atonal/contemporary/minimalist).

There was no evidence that any one style succeeded better than any other, although there were some variations within some of the briefs (see below). The range of work was very wide, from outstanding efforts that would have done well at A2, to pieces that were barely of GCSE standard.

In terms of infringements, not all centres followed the instrumental requirements of the briefs which are all stated very clearly. Examiners this year reported fewer instances of under-length compositions. The specification requires a piece lasting 'at least three minutes' and this represents a minimum requirement. However, it is not imperative to write more than three minutes-worth, nor is it necessary to cut the piece off at the three-minute mark (which some candidates do quite abruptly). Candidates should exercise their artistic judgment to ensure the piece fits its timeframe.

Many weaknesses are commented upon year on year. These include an inability to distinguish between acoustic and MIDI instruments and poor textural management, over reliance on copy and paste to develop structures and limited harmonic vocabulary. Compositions at the lower end of the mark range were characterised by insecure technical control. Those at the top demonstrated a thorough understanding of forces and textures and inventive structures that, in the words of the mark scheme, had a 'sense of wholeness'.

### The composition briefs

**Composing expressively** was the most popular choice (45% - but a drop in last year's 54%). Along with the song option, this produced the widest spread of marks, with 17% achieving better than 30/40 and 20% achieving less than half marks.

The brief implied an arch-like structure in which the storm built up and then died away and the challenge was to respond to this with some subtlety. The weaker candidates relied on more simplistic devices, such as getting faster or louder whilst the stronger ones used all the musical elements, especially harmony, to create atmosphere. Submissions covered a wide range of ensembles from solo piano to full orchestra.

The sleeve notes that accompanied compositions in this particular brief showed that the stronger candidates had done their homework, having cited most of the obvious compositions that feature storms; Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and Britten's *Sea Interludes*.

Topic 2, the **Variations**, was third in popularity, although there was a sharp rise to 22% from the 16% take-up in 2011. This topic attracted many strong candidates - a

significant number of these offering 'classical' submissions of which 26% of the marks were located in the excellent bands and above.

High marks were earned largely through solid technique, rather than through having taken an imaginative leap by following the hints given in the brief that the music should pass through a range of historical or world styles. Candidates interpreted this part of the brief in different ways. For some 'different musical styles' meant a journey through musical history or round the world. For others, it meant different instrumental playing styles and textural devices. Not all candidates satisfied the basic requirement to compose an original melody as the basis for their variations.

The **song** option (29%) was second choice and, like the *Passing Storm* brief, showed a wide spread of marks with 19% gaining more than 30/40 and 16% gaining less than half marks.

This option was dominated by popular songs, and of the 19% that gained marks higher than 30/40, most of these were popular in style. One possible reason for the classical songs doing less well is that many were composed using Sibelius and, unlike the popular songs that were recorded live, a Sibelius-generated composition often had not had the benefit of having been sung, so leaving misjudgements in word setting and melodic line going unchecked. Another reason that was suggested by the examiners for the rise in quality of popular songwriting was the influence of Adele – a singer-songwriter with a strong sense of melody who rose to particular prominence during 2011-12. It should be noted, however, that scores for popular songs often tended to be sketchy, consisting of poorly formatted stave notation, undetailed screen shots and, in some instances, a mere page of lyrics.

There was no overall evidence that candidates offering popular music wrote better or worse sleeve notes although weaker sleeve note writing often consisted of fulsome but largely undetailed praise for the candidate's favourite artist or band.

The **four part vocal** option again attracted the fewest candidates (4%), although as in previous years they tended to do well, with 34% achieving marks in the Excellent bands and above. Many candidates wrote in styles influenced by Britten and Tavener. Given the richness of 2012 in terms of events (the Queen's Golden Jubilee, the World Cup and the Olympics) it was surprising how few candidates drew on these and instead opted to set standard liturgical texts.

### **The sleeve note**

Examiners reported that sleeve notes were again improved this year.

74% achieved better than half marks (a marked increase on the 2011 figure of 63% and the 2010 figure of 57%). 35% gained marks in the upper 16/20 range compared with 20% in 2011, and 15% in 2009 and 2010. At the lower end of the mark range there was a further drop in those gaining less than 5/20 – down by 1%.

Centres continue to respond to the fact that a significant number of marks are at stake – one third of the total marks for the unit as a whole. Many candidates added extra pages this year, in some cases as many as five – leading some examiners to express surprise that they could all have been completed in the time allowed. However, the strategy was not always successful and it was not uncommon for entire pages to fail to attract any

marks at all as they were filled with lists of mundane and spurious observations ('the arpeggio in bar 5 was influenced by the arpeggio in Beethoven's Septet'). Candidates should be reminded that there is nothing to be gained in commenting on routine musical devices such as figurations, cadences, passing notes, dissonances and ornaments unless they are contextualised or otherwise given some substantiation.

Many candidates gained full marks for Question 1 but those who did not failed adequately to identify examples of repetition and/or contrast. It is not sufficient simply to observe that passages are 'different' or 'varied'.

Last year's report stressed that in Question 2 four features of interest must be identified, but that these need to be *genuine* features of interest. It should also be noted that dynamics are *not* one of the elements identified in the question rubric.

Responses to Question 3 were much improved, despite the tendency, identified above, for some candidates to write additional pages of irrelevance. A set of bullet-pointed lists of influences was often the most successful approach in which an influence, coupled with an example of this in the candidate's composition and a location, gained a mark. Candidates should be reminded that although the question itself carries 12 marks, it is necessary to provide 17 points in all to gain full marks and that the mark scheme is based on a sliding scale.

### **Administration**

There were few reports of missing work or CDs damaged in the post. Postage and packing was generally secure and centres responded to last year's plea not to record all their candidates' work on a single CD. However, some centres provided a data CD (containing .wav, mp3 or midi files) rather than an audio CD.

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