

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2013

GCE Music 6MU02
Composing

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There was a significant rise in the mean mark from 39.1 to 41.3, the result of a further improvement this year in the sleeve notes. Some candidates managed to boost their unit mark by providing a strong sleeve note to balance a relatively weak composition. Equally, many excellent pieces were let down by a poor sleeve note.

Overall, 87% of the candidates achieved better than half marks for the compositions (the same percentage as last year). However, there was some evidence that those opting for composition Brief 1 achieved slightly better: this was chosen by nearly 50% of the candidates and, of those, 70% achieved better than half marks. Many seem to have been aided by the Debussy set work which both acted as a convenient compositional model and provided much fruitful analytical material upon which to draw when writing the sleeve note.

The number of under-length compositions has reduced year by year (the specification requires a piece lasting 'at least three minutes' and nearly all candidates succeed in meeting that target), although examiners reported an increase in the number of brief infringements. In many of these cases the instrumental and vocal requirements had been ignored, the most common instance being pieces submitted under the Instrumental Music Area of Study that had been written for voices. Some responses to the songwriting brief showed little evidence of a link with a newspaper headline, being pop or jazz instrumentals.

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 vocabularies. An increasing tendency has been towards over-long pieces. Many of these submissions this year ran to five or six minutes and rarely had enough material or structural control to be fully convincing for all of the time.

The composition briefs

After a drop in popularity last year, composing expressively (*Into the Forest*), was the most popular choice at 50% and showed a return similar to previous figures (54% in 2011). This may have contributed to the rise in the mean mark as a significant percentage (25%) gained marks of 30+.

As we have reported, many were greatly aided in this task by taking advantage of the Debussy set work as a model and pieces drew on its instrumentation (many pieces began with solo flute melody and featured harp) and structure (modified ternary form). Thus this brief appears to have been slightly more accessible than those of previous years; many candidates took it as an opportunity to paint a scene whereas in previous years they were required to create a process like a storm or battle, both of which require a little more structural and developmental ingenuity.

There was a wide spread of marks, weaker candidates often relying on sound effects like bird song and rushing streams to provide atmosphere.

The sleeve notes that accompanied compositions in this particular brief gained some advantage through reference to the more 'expressive' set works – such as the Debussy and the Schubert – and this meant that many of the pieces tended to be accompanied by strong sleeve notes.

Topic 2, for a composition based on a motif, was third in popularity, although there was a drop from last year's figure of 22% to 15%, similar to the 16% of 2011.

This brief produced a wide range of responses from pieces based on the Anthology works (especially the Shostakovich quartet) to sets of variations on a theme, some of which, examiners commented, often involved a highly liberal interpretation of the term 'motif'. Some of the more successful pieces used Reich's *Electric Counterpoint* (a GCSE set work) as a model and the stronger candidates were able to develop the material convincingly. However, of all the briefs, this one had the greater number of marks in the lowest band where the weaker candidates lacked sufficient technique and creative stamina to sustain interest over the full three minutes.

The song option (32%) was second choice and, like the *Into the Forest* brief, showed a wide spread of marks. As in previous years this option was dominated by popular songs. A point of interest to the examiners was the extent to which the candidate had met the brief in terms of basing the piece on a newspaper headline. Some approaches were highly imaginative, drawing on recent news events as well as historical headlines and famous (or infamous) tabloid front pages. Other candidates adopted a 'catch-all' approach and wrote a song about love or war that had only a very generalised relevance. Such pieces were often accompanied by equally generalised sleeve note submissions.

Word setting was often noted as being particularly weak, especially in cases where the melody had been composed at the computer. It was common in these cases for a flowing melody to have been devised at the keyboard and the lyrics added to the score afterwards with little reference to the metre and with the result that the scansion of the words had been completely overlooked.

Brief 4, for a vocal piece based on a haiku, again attracted the fewest candidates (3%), although as in previous years they tended to do well. The best work showed evidence of word painting in the vocal setting and many candidates opted to write two or more contrasted movements. Tavener's *The Lamb* proved a useful model, both as a source of compositional ideas and as a source of material for the sleeve note.

The sleeve note

The sleeve notes were again improved upon this year. 80% gained better than half marks (compared with 74% last year) and 50% gained better than 16/20 (compared with 35% in 2012).

Questions 1 and 2 frequently gained full marks or nearly full marks. Many candidates appeared to have employed the tactic of providing very full

answers, perhaps in the hope of securing these first 8 marks before going onto Question 3 where even a modest mark would take them well over half marks overall. Sleeve note marking suggests that some centres are still under the impression that Question 3 needs 12 points to be made for 12 marks. In fact, the mark scheme requires 17 points to be made for full marks and features a sliding scale for the mark bands below this.

Answers to Question 3 were again improved, with many centres having adopted a formulaic but often productive approach. For some candidates this involved listing as many musical devices or features that they could and then finding a location for each in their own composition – which usually resulted in several supplementary pages being added to the question paper. This was sometimes successful but failed as a strategy when the observation was relatively mundane (such as ‘my piece is in C major’). Other candidates lost marks because they spent far too long writing a detailed analysis of the piece that influenced them, rather than explaining how the various features were evident in their own composition.

Administration

There were few reports of missing work or CDs damaged in the post, although some centres posted their work to Edexcel rather than the allocated examiner. Some centres provided a data CD (containing .wav, mp3 or midi files) rather than an audio CD.

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