

Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback Summer 2010

GCE

GCE Music (6MU05) Paper 01 Composition and Technical Studies

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General Introduction

This unit, consisting of four composition briefs and three compositional techniques options, was effectively a combination of two papers in the legacy specification. Both had mean marks from year to year around 60% and the new unit also had a similar mean mark of 48.4 (out of 80 = 60.5%). Moreover, candidate performance for composition has historically tended to be better, with, on average, 90% gaining grade E passes in composition compared with 75% in the techniques paper. This tendency towards better performance in composition was sustained in the new unit.

The difference in the marks for the two tasks was further consolidated by two features of the new mark schemes: .

- Presentation is no longer assessed, and this gave the composition marks a slight lift as this had been a common cause of loss of marks in the past
- The assessment of the techniques questions included a new criterion, Sense of Line (meaning melodic construction). In practice, this meant that harmony needed not only to be coherent with no part writing errors but that the lines themselves needed to be elegant and vocal. The introduction of this additional assessment criterion had a slightly depressing effect on the techniques marks

Overall, 60% of the candidates achieved better than half marks. There was, however, a significant difference in the spread across the two options. 83% of compositions achieved better than half marks compared with 63% of the techniques answers.

Although past trends have thus been sustained, the examiners felt that, given the proportion of candidates who achieved quite poorly in their techniques answers (31% gaining less than 15/40), it would be advisable to start teaching techniques in the first year of the course. Teachers might either use the latter part of the AS summer term, or incorporate some of the basics during the harmony teaching for unit 3.

Weak harmony and part writing have always been a handicap towards good marks in both the past composition and techniques papers and these features are clearly continuing to be weaknesses. Unlike the legacy specification, it is not possible to avoid tasks based on traditional (or popular) harmony by opting for minimalism, serialism or electronic music instead. This seems to have created something of a trap for some candidates.

Choice of options

64% chose techniques and 36% chose compositions. The Bach chorale was overwhelmingly the most popular option, accounting for 40% of the candidature. This was trailed a long way behind by the rondo composition option at 18% and baroque counterpoint at 14%. The most popular combination was a composition and a Bach chorale.

There was a number of instances of brief infringements, most commonly a failure to comply with the instrumental requirements. Edexcel received many enquiries about this aspect of the briefs through the Ask the Expert service and, in response to this, clearer and tighter guidelines will be given in the 2011 briefs.

Brief 1 - rondo

This was the most popular composition option, chosen by 18% of the candidates. It carried the widest spread of marks. There were some very impressive examples, many with a strong key structure and a sense of classical drama, although many of the weaker candidates seemed unaware of what a rondo was. Some chose to write a set of variations (which at least satisfied the 'development and contrast' part of the brief) while others chose a popular song, in the belief that a chorus structure was the same as a rondo.

Brief 2 - test piece

This was a small entry at 6% but it tended to be done well by candidates writing confidently for their own instruments. A number of pieces here achieved full marks and showed a thorough command of the instrument and an awareness of its potential.

The weaker examples consisted of scales and arpeggios and, as in Brief 1, variation structures were often adopted as a way round the problem of structuring the piece and adding variety.

Brief 3- film music

The take-up of this option (6%) was a great surprise, given the popularity of film music as a topic in the past (chosen by 25%).

There were some extremely well focused submissions although many candidates fell into the trap of writing a medley of nationalistic styles as the 'plane jetted from one country to another but with little linking material to provide continuity.

The quality of the stylistic writing was frequently impressive and almost all countries and cultures were covered in the exam. But this raised the interesting question of why candidates could have such an acute and perceptive ear for stylistic nuance but had so much difficulty in harmonising a perfect cadence.

Brief 4 - Balearic island

This option was often coupled with that of film music and, like that option, was chosen by 6% of the candidates.

There were many Flamenco-inspired pieces and this option attracted a lot of guitarists. There were fewer club dance examples than anticipated, although the technology option appears to have opened the door to some candidates who submitted screen shots rather than a score, even in cases where staff notation would have been more appropriate.

On the subject of scores, it has already been noted that these are no longer assessed. However, it is nonetheless important to provide a neat and comprehensive score as this provides the examiner with many the clues to the candidate's intentions. A well marked score demonstrates that the candidate understands string writing, for example.

A carefully annotated track sheet or screen shot provides information about technological processes for which credit may be given.

Baroque counterpoint

This option was chosen by 14% of the candidates and was usually submitted alongside a Bach chorale and rarely with a composition.

The introduction in this new examination of the need for candidates to provide passages using their own figures proved a challenge for many and marks were lost because of incorrect or missing figuring. Some candidates submitted computer printed work, although there were cases where the question had not been copied correctly and in some of these cases, worryingly, the candidate had not appeared to notice.

Bach chorale

This was the most popular option and results were similar to those of the baroque counterpoint question with a wide spread of marks from single figures to full marks.

Many candidates failed to resolve the tied note at the very beginning and common errors in the weaker responses included inappropriate use of 6/4 chords (many examiners commented on this) and failure to deal effectively with the minims. The new criterion, *Sense of Line*, has already received comment, and many of the more capable candidates lost marks here because of wide and angular leaps, especially in the bass.

Popular song

This was chosen by 10% of the candidates. Many found this task a challenge - possibly because it was underestimated. Melodic lines tended to be angular and opportunities for harmonic invention missed. Candidates relied on a very limited chordal vocabulary and little sense of the way in which dissonance is used in popular music. Nonetheless, it was generally felt by examiners to be more closely comparable with the other tasks than previous popular music options (for example the legacy 32 bar song).

Administration

There were few problems here. Some centres submitted all their compositions on a single CD where the requirement is for one candidate per CD. This avoids the possibility of all the centre's work going missing in the post if a remark is requested.

A final reminder to centres is to:

- check the Edexcel website regularly for papers and updates
- 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 5 Composition and Technical Studies

Grade	Max. Mark	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Raw boundary mark	80	64	58	52	46	40	35
Uniform boundary mark	90	81	72	63	54	45	36

A* is only used in conversion from raw to uniform marks. It is not a published unit grade.

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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