

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2012

GCE Music (6MU05)
Composition and Technical Studies

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GCE Music 2012

Examiners' report - 6MU05

There was a rise in the mean mark from 48.9 in 2011 to 51.5, the result of an improvement in the quality of the technical studies. The balance between these and the compositions was maintained largely unchanged. 54% chose technical studies (51% in 2011) and 46% chose compositions (49% in 2010).

Once again, the Bach chorale was the most popular option (31%). Film music proved more popular than in previous years (up from 9% and the most popular composition brief). There was also a sharp rise in numbers taking Baroque counterpoint after last year's sudden dip (to 8%).

One important development in 2012 was that the gap between the marks for composition and those for techniques narrowed considerably so that the two components of the unit are now more balanced. Historically the techniques marks have tended to trail behind.

87% of the composers achieved better than half marks (78% last year) compared with 83% of those offering techniques (61% last year). There was an improvement at the top end of the two most popular options: in the Bach chorale (chosen by 31%) 16% achieved better than 30/40 and in the film music option (chosen by 12%) 14% achieved better than 30/40.

This year, as for Unit 2, we additionally monitored the different musical styles. Three very broad categories were adopted and, in round figures, the proportions of the submissions were 70% classical/tonal, 20% popular/jazz, 10% 20th/21st century (eg. atonal/contemporary/minimalist).

There was thus a higher proportion of 'classical' compositions than those submitted for Unit 2 and, overall, those working in a classical style tended to do better – 60% of those amongst the upper marks bands of 30/40 had offered classical/tonal work. Nonetheless, a noticeable number of film scores in a contemporary style earned high marks.

On the other hand work in a popular style offered under the Exploiting Instruments brief tended to do less well. Many students thought that the inclusion of a mere solo was sufficient to meet the requirements of the brief. Surprisingly few responded to the Cinderella brief with a pop or jazz composition.

The composition briefs

Brief 1 – Minuet and Trio (12%)

The main challenge here was to establish a suitable dance-like feel which would stand subsequent development and then to provide a satisfyingly contrasted trio. It produced a wide spread of marks. The weaker candidates struggled with the requirement to provide some variation in the repeat of the minuet, relying on basic devices such as playing the melody an octave higher, or simply adding ornaments. Many examiners commented on the limited harmonic vocabulary of the candidates and their inability to manage a successful tonal scheme with convincing modulations.

Brief 2 – Encore Item (9%)

Notwithstanding the above comments about work in a popular style, this option tended to attract some very able candidates whose work was based on a thorough knowledge of their

own instrument. The best pieces had character and a sense of occasion as implied by the brief, whilst the weaker efforts consisted of a display of fairly basic study material of scales and arpeggios.

Brief 3- Film music (thriller) (16%)

Candidates seemed to respond more enthusiastically to this brief than those in the past. The majority of compositions were James Bond inspired, or suspense/horror. Styles were varied, ranging from 'Bond-type' big band approaches to Gothic/dissonant.

As ever, the secret is to create a seamless structure which carries the listener convincingly through a series of moods. The effectiveness of harmony and dissonance in film music is often underestimated by students and many pieces suffered by being stuck in the same key for too long.

A surprising number of candidates failed to provide the required summary of the scenes. Some who did wrote over-complex scenarios which caused compositional problems.

Brief 4 – Cinderella (9%)

Alongside a range of set dance pieces there were some very effective show songs but many examiners commented how few candidates took an imaginative leap and developed scenes around the other characters in the story, such as the Ugly Sisters or Fairy Godmother, or to give the pantomime a modern gloss. There were many waltzes, fanfares for Prince Charming and bells chiming midnight. As with film music many candidates failed to provide the required summary.

The technical studies

Baroque counterpoint (12%)

There was an increase in numbers since last year, with many at the lower end of the ability range, serving perhaps to dilute the previous years' higher mean marks for this particular task.

Although most manage successfully to complete the melody line, difficulties are evident in passages where they are required to plan a coherent harmonic progression and then to add a bass line with figures. Errors in figuring are a common cause of lost marks – in particular, candidates need to be aware that the figure 6 indicates a first inversion and should not be confused with a second inversion. Only the most able spotted opportunities for imitation.

Bach chorale (31%)

As indicated, there was an increase in the amount of excellent work at the top end. A significant discriminator was the choice of chords and the handling of the cadences. In the five cadences that had to be completed there were several opportunities for modulation, although the less enterprising candidates opted to remain in G major throughout. Bar 6 caused difficulties when candidates attempted to modulate to E minor, incorrectly employing the A quaver as an unresolved seventh of a B major dominant chord.

Whilst the addition of passing notes may add to the mark for style, care should be taken that they do not create parallels (and it should also be borne in mind that a passing note will not 'remove' parallels that are already present).

Popular song (11%)

There was some evidence that the standard had improved although there was nonetheless a wide spread of marks. Some of the weaker candidates achieved a reasonable mark by composing a melody of broken chords that faithfully followed the chord symbols and achieved well under this criterion, even though the mark for sense of line was much reduced as a result. This particular task is easily underestimated; there is a need to join new material to the given material convincingly and to understand fully the implied harmonic structure. In many submissions the impression given is that this has been undertaken as a 'paper exercise' without the worked answer ever having been played.

Administration

Last year the following comment was made: 'completion and printing of the technical studies using a computer is becoming more common and there has been a corresponding increase in the number of errors made whilst transcribing the question. Some candidates then proceed to work the question without apparently discovering their mistakes'.

This year many examiners again made reference to this trend in their reports, adding that the addition of figuring to the counterpoint option can be quite tricky and was sometimes abandoned altogether when the candidate ran out of time. Centres should note that figuring may be added neatly by hand. Examiners also requested that candidates who use a computer might mark clearly the passages they have added.

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