

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2013

GCE Music 6MU05
Composition and Technical Study

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The unit has a mean mark in 2013 of 51.8 compared with 51.5 in 2012.

The balance between numbers opting for technical studies and those for compositions was also maintained with a 50/50 split and, once again, the Bach chorale was the most popular option with an increased percentage of 36% (31% in 2012).

The closing of the gap between the marks for composition and techniques which was noticeable in 2012, was maintained in 2013. 85% of the compositions achieved better than half marks (2% fewer than last 2012) compared with 83% of the technical studies (unchanged from 2012). However, fewer technical studies are being awarded marks at the very top.

55% of the compositions achieved a mark in the 31-35 holistic band compared with 45% of technical studies, but in the top holistic band (36-40) 72% of the compositions achieved a mark of 36+ compared with 28% of technical studies. A significant number of compositions in this top category were in a contemporary style.

This year we again monitored the different musical styles, adopting three very broad categories. In round figures the proportions were 75% classical/tonal (up by 5%), 15% popular/jazz (down by 5%), and 10% atonal/contemporary/minimalist.

The brief that attracted the most popular music submissions was Brief 3 – music for dance. Popular pieces in arch form (Brief 1) were the least successful. The examiners commented that there has been a gradual decline over the last two or three years in the number of popular music compositions.

The composition briefs

The most common submission was again a composition coupled with a Bach chorale.

Brief 1 – arch form – 15%

This was the second most popular composition option and attracted a wide range of candidates (including many of the weaker ones) and produced a wide spread of marks. Many pieces consisted of basic ABCBA structures that had been copied and pasted together and only the most able candidates were able to create a seamless and varied form. Many examiners commented on the lack of imaginative tonal planning with candidates tending to rely on texture and/or rhythm as a way of creating contrast.

Brief 2 – exploiting instruments – 8%

This brief was one of the more successfully undertaken. As in previous years the most successful pieces were by students writing confidently for their own instrument. Many students relied on humour (funny instrumental effects and Haydn-like surprises) or produced a set of variations on nursery rhymes. Some pieces failed fully to meet the brief by being not entirely suitable for children and regarded instead as an opportunity for a more 'grown up' and mature virtuosic solo.

Brief 3 – film music – 17%

This was the most popular composition brief and many pieces were inspired by the music of the Life on Earth TV series.

The most popular locations were the Poles and Africa and the best examples consisted of a seamless journey through a series of images. This option included a number of minimalist pieces – there are several centres that specialise in this style and each year they seem to search for the most convenient brief. Minimalism can be very effective when coupled with visual images although here the composer needs to develop a greater sense of contrast and colour than might perhaps be required for a minimalist piece written for the concert hall.

Brief 4 – dance music – 11%

Submissions were 2% up on last year with many examples of ballroom styles (waltzes and tangos) alongside traditional Irish and Scottish dance. Many candidates seemed to have difficulty sustaining the piece beyond establishing a viable dance feel and an engaging opening melody. Several centres submitted songs – this being the only brief at A2 in which a vocal work is allowable. Many of the submitted works of art consisted, predictably, of pictures of dance scenes and surprisingly few candidates took an imaginative leap and composed a piece for contemporary dance based on a more abstract work of art.

The technical studies

Technical study 1 – baroque counterpoint – 5%

This continues to be offered by the stronger candidates although many continue to be challenged by the requirement to add a bass line and figures. This year the syncopations in the given melody caused difficulties where candidates were unable to control the points where these might create parallels. This option was usually coupled with a Bach chorale, seldom a composition and never a popular song.

Technical study 2 – Bach chorale – 36%

This was again the most popular option in the unit. Most candidates achieved marks in the 26-30 band. Of all the criteria, chord choices tended to gain the higher marks. A convincing tonal scheme was navigated effectively by the stronger candidates who provided a good range of cadences but secure chord choices amongst the weaker candidates were often made at the expense of an elegant sense of line. Many of the weaker submissions consisted of unsuitable 6/4 chords – also, a curiously common occurrence this year was the Vc chord at cadences, typically Ib, V7c, I.

Technical study – popular song – 8%

Submissions were down by 2% and, as in previous years, underestimated as a task by many candidates. Many gain marks through accurate interpretation of the chord symbols, but with an angular melody of broken chords which harmonise successfully but fail to flow melodically. Marks of 7 and 8 for chords, coupled with marks of 3 for sense of line were not uncommon.

There was some evidence that this year's task proved slightly more difficult than previous years' popular songs. In particular, the Gm7 chord in bar 17

and the extended chord progression towards the end, proved difficult for some.

Administration

There were more reported instances of brief infringements this year, mainly failures to follow the instrumental requirements (arch form pieces for unaccompanied choir, for example) and instances where two compositions had been submitted under the same Area of Study. However, there were fewer reported instances of under-length work.

Not all centres followed the requirement for a score to be 'appropriate to the style of music', to quote the specification. There were several instances of pieces composed in the western classical tradition that had been submitted as a set of track diagrams in the form of screen shots. There were also some eccentric technical study submissions; Bach chorales scored for strings and pop songs with figured bass.

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