

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2014

Pearson Edexcel GCE in Music
6MU05
Composition and Technical Study

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Publications Code UA039571

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General Introduction

There was a rise in the mean mark this year, from 51.7 to 53. This was due to an improvement in the standard of the compositions with 2% more candidates gaining over half marks.

However, there was a fall in the marks for technical studies with 78% gaining more than half marks (a drop of 5% over last year) Marks for the chorale remained largely stable but the overall marks for this part of the unit were depressed by poorer marks for the popular song.

The balance between compositions and technical studies was exactly 50-50 and the most common submission was again a composition coupled with a chorale.

The historical gap between the mean marks for compositions and technical studies has been closing in recent years but this year it widened, 87% of compositions gaining better than half marks compared with 78% for technical studies.

This year we again monitored the different musical styles, adopting three very broad categories and the figures were the same as last year, the proportions being 75% classical/tonal, 15% popular/jazz, 10% contemporary/minimalist. Those choosing the more 'classical' briefs, 1 and 2, tended to do better with 36% achieving marks of 30+ in the excellent class. Numbers for film music were surprisingly small (5%).

The Briefs

Brief 1 – sonatina – 16%

This proved to be the most popular composition option and attracted a wide range of candidates and a wide spread of marks with a bunch in the 26-30 class. Every year this brief requires the candidate to devise and manage a convincing tonal scheme and only the more able candidates managed this successfully. The weaker ones were hampered by a narrow harmonic vocabulary and an over-reliance on computerised copy and paste with which to develop structures. A common theme running through all the examiners' reports was that harmony was the weakest of the various criteria with many candidates struggling to manage modulations convincingly and to create a piece with some tonal variety. Some examiners commented that attempts to create a contrasting second subject often resulted in wildly exaggerated contrasts of metre or style when more melodic invention would have been more appropriate.

Brief 2 – exploiting instruments – 14%

There was a significant rise in those opting for this brief (last year it was 8%) and it was generally done well with 36% of marks being over 31/40. This may have contributed to the rise in the mean mark for compositions and is generally a high achieving brief in which the most successful pieces were by students

writing confidently for their own instrument. Many submissions were for solo instruments with keyboard accompaniment and it is possible that, in composing for relatively fewer instruments (film music was usually scored for full orchestra), candidates were able to concentrate on, and refine, other aspects of the composition. More instruments do not automatically lead to more marks.

Brief 3 – film music – 5%

A very sharp drop in numbers from last year when it was the most popular composition option at 17%. This was a surprise, given the number of high-profile sporting events that have been held this year during the run-up to the exam, including the world cup and tour de France. Nonetheless, it may be that this brief offered fewer models in the film and TV repertoire on which to draw compared with previous years, or that those with a special interest in film music are now opting for music technology where they can now work to a downloadable film clip.

The challenges remain the same each year and the most able created a vivid and seamless structure of contrasting material whilst the weaker candidates relied on a medley of disconnected ideas.

Brief 4 – circus procession – 14%

This proved a popular option (up from 11% last year) and produced a range of approaches from traditional big top items with marches, waltzes and polkas to more sinister takes on Pierrot Lunaire, Circus of Horrors and the Victorian ‘freak show’. This brief also attracted a few vocal compositions as well as extended rock items that might have been suitable for a contemporary circus but had more likely been slotted into the most convenient brief.

A typical submission consisted of a succession of contrasting acts – often clowns, trapeze artists and elephants that were connected, Pictures at an Exhibition – style, with a promenade or interlude. Most were highly evocative although the most successful avoided being a mere medley of themes.

Technical Studies

Technical study 1 – baroque counterpoint – 8%

Numbers were slightly up on last year (at 5%) but the increase in numbers tended to be at the lower end of the ability range. Unusually this year, 21% gained less than half marks and this tended to depress the mean mark for what in the past has been a high achieving option

The most successful completions were those in which the candidate had understood the tonal scheme and were in possession of a harmonic vocabulary to make it work. Weaker candidates tended to follow the figures but produced dull successions of crotchets and angular melodies. The most common cause of lost marks was failure to follow the figuring, or to provide correct figuring in places where figures had to be added.

A number of candidates chose to offer computer-worked submissions but did not copy the original correctly or format their printed answer.

Technical study 2 – Bach chorale – 33%

Numbers were slightly down on last year (36%) and the bunch of marks tended more towards the 21-25 band rather than last year's 26-30. As with many of the other briefs, weaker candidates were seriously handicapped by a narrow harmonic vocabulary with most of their chords – and often all - being in root position and failing to move from the home key and explore the range of possible modulations. Very few candidates navigated the final cadence without parallels.

Technical study – popular song – 10%

Numbers were up by 2% but the general standard fell - almost 30% of the submissions were below half marks and only 1% was in the top outstanding category. Bars 22-28 proved a particular challenge and many of the weaker completions consisted of insecure chord progressions that lacked logical direction, even though the harmonisation of each individual chord was often accurate.

This option, whose demands appear to have been underestimated by many of the weaker candidates, requires a secure working knowledge of chord progressions and chordal syntax coupled with an understanding of the broad modulatory scheme of the question.

Administration

There were far fewer instances of under-length work this year but a number of candidates offered two compositions from the same Area of Study.

Several centres failed to send a signed authentication form. This is found on the last page of the question paper. A signed form is a requirement and so Pearson should be contacted if difficulties arise.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

<http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx>

