

Principal Moderator Feedback

Summer 2015

Pearson Edexcel GCE in Music
(6MU05) Paper 1

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Principals' Report

There was a small rise in the mean mark this year, from 53 to 53.9, attributable to an improvement in the standard of the compositions with 5% more gaining over half marks.

The gap between the marks for compositions and technical studies widened again this year and there was a significant increase in the take-up of the chorale option (41%).

The historical gap between the mean marks for compositions and technical studies widened again this year. Whereas 92% of the compositions gained better than half marks this was achieved in only 83% of the technical studies. Moreover, on average, 37% of the composition marks were in the excellent band, but only 17% of the technical studies.

This year we again monitored the different musical styles. As in previous years those choosing the more 'classical' briefs, 1 and 2, tended to do better with 37% achieving marks of 30+ in the excellent band. Popular music styles tended to be more common and more successful in the film music and dance briefs, where 33% were placed in the excellent band.

The most common submission was again a composition coupled with a chorale, indeed many candidates this year appear to have opted for a chorale rather than a second composition.

THE BRIEFS

Brief 1 – Introduction and allegro – 17%

This proved to be the most popular composition option and attracted a wide range of candidates who performed well with 41% being placed at excellent and above.

There were many sonata movements for solo instrument and piano, handled well and, possibly, chosen over brief 2 whose numbers were down this year. Not all candidates were able to devise a convincing tonal scheme and the weaker ones relied on repetition as a means of developing and extending ideas. There were a number of pop and jazz examples which tended either to be very successful or very unconvincing, especially in cases where formal subtlety had been reduced to a short, slow introduction followed by a fast set of improvised solo verses.

Brief 2 – exploiting instruments – 7%

There was a significant fall in those opting for this brief (last year it was 14%) although it was generally done well with 43% of marks being over 31/40. Marks for this brief, and those for Brief 1, may have contributed to the rise in the mean mark for compositions.

As in previous years the most successful pieces were by students writing confidently for their own instrument whilst the least successful failed to realise the chosen instrument's potential. The submissions showed a very wide interpretation of the word 'style' as included in the brief. In some cases this resulted in a series of different playing styles; legato-staccato or employing a variety of playing effects such as slap bass or string double-stops and pizzicati. In other cases style was taken to mean classical, pop or jazz and many of these approaches resulted in inventive sets of variations.

Brief 3 – film music – 11%

There was a rise in numbers from last year, more in line with previous years and displaying a typically wide spread of marks with a bunch in the 20-30 ranges. Many candidates opted for a surprisingly traditional theme park; carousel waltzes and ghost trains rather than the high-tech energy of most modern attractions. As reported in previous years the challenges inherent in this particular brief remain the same: the most able candidates create a vivid and seamless structure of contrasting material whilst the weaker candidates rely on a medley of disconnected ideas and scenes.

Brief 4 – Rhythms from around the world – 7%

This brief proved far less popular than in previous years, down from 14% last year and 11% the year before. Many examples were in a Latin style – successfully so – although there was a wide spread of marks. Work at the weaker end showed little sense of rhythmic vitality or evidence that any research into the chosen aspect of world rhythm had been undertaken and structures were often based on material that had been copied and pasted. As in previous years this brief attracted a few vocal compositions that appeared to have been slotted into the most convenient brief.

TECHNICAL STUDIES

Technical study 1 – baroque counterpoint – 7%

Take-up and standards were similar to previous years with 36% gaining excellent marks.

There were several opportunities for imitation that were missed by many of the candidates, the most obvious being at bar 19. Also, an opportunity to repeat material from bar 16 at bar 33, transposed, was missed. Some candidates found the harmonic rhythm of 6/8 a challenge and some completions contained bars with a stylistically inappropriate chord change on the fourth quaver of a six semiquaver group.

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.

An increasing number of candidates offered computer-produced printed answers that often failed to reproduce the question accurately or which omitted the given figuring.

Technical study 2 – Bach chorale – 41%

Numbers were significantly greater this year – 41% compared with 33% last year. Fewer marks (only 19%) lay in the excellent bands compared with other options and most marks (67%) were bunched between 20 and 30.

It appears that the increase in numbers opting for this task took place at the lower end of the mark range and that this contributed to the widening of the gap between the marks for compositions and those for technical studies. Many examiners reported work that contained more than 10 parallels.

Most candidates planned the tonal scheme effectively and had good cadences in B minor in bar 8 and D major in bar 10 but many failed to spot that ii7b was not possible at bar 10 beat 1 – it had to be plain iib. The final cadence, for which the best solution is the dominant on beats 1 and 2 with a 4 3 suspension, also caused many problems. There were countless parallel fifths between beats 1 and 2 by those who attempted a ii7b –V-I construction. The only way to avoid this is to take an additional chord, either VI or ib, on the second quaver of beat 1.

Technical study – popular song – 11%

Numbers were similar to 2014 (when 10% took this option).

There was a slight improvement in the standard over last year when this question presented perhaps more of a challenge harmonically. Nonetheless, harmony tends still to be weak and most marks were gained by the tactic of maintaining accuracy in terms of chord symbols and realisation, usually at the expense of elegant lines (a tactic that also tends to be employed in the other two technical studies).

Many candidates suffered from a narrow vocabulary of chords so that the passages requiring a bass line with chords tended to be treated rather cautiously and a heavy reliance on the repetition of a few simple chords – C major, A minor, G major being chief among them.

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.

As with Unit 2, there was an increase in the number of CDs that included audiofiles that were not playable on a regular CD player.

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