



Pearson
Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2023

Pearson Edexcel GCE
In Music (9MU0)
Paper 01 : Performing

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Introduction

As expected, the 2023 Examination series saw a return to the full eight-minute recitals as required in the current Specification. On the whole, the response to this was good but there was a higher number of recitals than in 2019 which fell short of that requirement, even if only by a few seconds, and also a larger number than usual of submissions which were rated as Standard or even as Less Difficult on the Difficulty Level scaling.

It cannot be ruled out that some of this year's candidates were more affected than others by the interruptions that may have occurred to their instrumental or vocal tuition during the years when under normal circumstances they would have been preparing for and then taking their GCSE exams and starting their sixth-form careers. On the other hand, some candidates may have found greater opportunities for practice during these years. Several examiners drew attention to performances of outstanding merit.

In the circumstances, candidates and their teachers and exams officers are to be thanked and congratulated for coping with the increased demands so well.

The Range of Submissions

The broad pattern remains the same as in recent years, almost all examiners reporting that the largest number of candidates presenting any one instrument were pianists and the second largest group were vocalists, covering classical, music theatre and popular music, and sometimes a mixture of these genres. There is then a considerable drop in the numbers presenting any of the other instruments, with violins, cellos, flutes and clarinets being predominant, along with drum kits and electric and bass guitars.

The number of recitals on the rarer orchestral instruments continues to decline, with a few french horns, violas and double basses and almost no oboes or bassoons. This obviously prompts concern for the future of orchestras and it must be hoped that some of those who begin on a 'main-

stream' instrument will see the opportunities that will exist and take up one of the less popular instruments at music college or at a similar stage in their progress towards other careers.

It should be noted that among the rarer submissions was one from a Chinese Karaoke Singer and one from a player of the erhu, a Chinese two-stringed fiddle.

The Range of Programmes

These remain very wide but this year presented a phenomenon which has not been apparent in previous years; that is, the presentation of a series of pieces in a recital of quite wide disparity in difficulty level. It was by no means uncommon for recitals to contain one grade 8 piece and other items of grade 4 or 5 standard. This may well be a symptom of the interruptions to normal tuition and practice opportunities caused by the pandemic. Such recitals were of course given due care in assessment by examiners but nonetheless often caused considerable problems in deciding the overall difficulty level of the recital. This matter is dealt with further in a section below.

The Length of Recitals

There was a notably larger number of recitals that fell short of the required eight minutes, a further piece of evidence of the challenge that faced some candidates in returning from the considerably relaxed requirements of the last few years. Short recitals are penalised on the basis of the percentage of time by which the submission falls short of eight minutes. Examiners are provided with a properly worked-out mathematical table, showing the deduction to be made to the final total mark for each 15-second slot by which that shortage occurs. There were recitals that were short by as much as two minutes or more, resulting in significant deductions in the final mark.

There were also many that were short by just a few seconds. In planning the programme, candidates and teachers should aim to reach a bit beyond the bare minimum of eight minutes in their preparation. A recital that only just exceeds the minimum requirement by a few seconds may on the day

of the recording fall short of the required minimum simply because, with the extra tension created by the importance of the occasion, or the presence of an audience, the music is played at faster speeds than on previous occasions.

Equally, it is often counter-productive to submit recitals that are significantly longer than eight minutes. Some candidates this year began new pieces in the tenth or later minute of their recital. This is unlikely to provide evidence of anything that the examiner has not already noticed but may on the other hand show some signs of tiredness, particularly among singers and wind instrumentalists. As the recital is assessed on a holistic basis, not piece by piece, this may have a downward impact on the mark awarded. It must also be said that a few highly talented candidates produced fine performances of long single movements. The advice given above is not intended to inhibit such candidates from making similar choices in the future.

The Difficulty Levels

The scaling for the various levels of difficulty of items chosen for inclusion in a candidate's recital is an important part of the assessment process and is therefore ultimately the responsibility of the examiner. On the whole, this has been well understood by centres and caused little very little problem. However, two factors appear to have made the decisions about Difficulty Level (DL) much more problematic this year. One has been the much greater number of submissions with various items ranging widely in DL, as already mentioned in this Report. The other is the proliferation of boards and other bodies which offer practical exams graded from 1 to 8 and beyond, with little or no evidence that their grading system is aligned with those of the better-known boards. One examiner mentioned ten different examining boards whose syllabuses he had consulted.

Centres may be glad of certain assurances for the immediate future. The first is that Pearson will continue to produce its own *Difficulty Level Booklet* and examiners will be asked to use the latest version of that. This is compiled from the current syllabuses of the main examining boards offering grades 1 to 8 and Diploma levels beyond that.

The second assurance is that where a Grade 8 or 9 item constitutes at least half of the minimum requirement of eight minutes, that submission will be rated as 'More Difficult' so long as the remainder of the eight minutes is at Grade 7; and will be rated as 'Standard' if the remainder of the eight minutes is at Grade 6 or a mixture of Grades 5 and 6.

Where a recital programme presents more complicated juxtapositions of varying difficulties and lengths of pieces, the examiner will do his/her best to follow the Specification in finding the average of the DLs. However, in such cases a second opinion will always be sought, with examiners consulting their team leaders and team leaders consulting the Principal or Assistant Principal examiner.

It is always appreciated if a centre has definite information as to the presence of a given piece in the syllabus of an examining board and includes this on the PAS (grade and name of board), though this will usually be checked by examiners.

There is cause for some concern with regard to the apparently increasing number of examining boards and some further investigation as to the impact of this on the Pearson assessment process may well have to take place in the future.

The 'New' Technology

The introduction of digital submission of recordings, scores and PAS forms caused few real difficulties last year but worked even more smoothly this year, with very few problems directly arising from the technology itself. Greater care needs to be taken by some centres to ensure that material for the correct component is sent to the appropriate examiner. Several examiners for Performing reported receiving material for the Composing component. A few submissions arrived without the appropriate recording, or scores, or PAS forms. In these cases, centres responded quickly to communications by the examiner but these omissions or errors take time to put right when examiners are already under considerable pressure of time.

Performance Authentication Sheets and Scores

These are important parts of a candidate's submission. Most centres handled these requirements very well but a few left the examiner in the position of having to find information which should have been given clearly on the PAS form or with scores whose pages were upside down or horizontal and/or with pieces in a different order from the performance on the recording. It is recognised that music staff and exams officers at centres may be under considerable pressure, particularly when multiple entries have to be uploaded by a certain date. However, those who deal with these things on behalf of candidates are asked to remember that examiners too normally have a considerable number of submissions to deal with and also have narrow time limits within which to complete the work on their allocation of these submissions. This does not allow for time spent on finding information which may be needed when deciding on the appropriate Difficulty Level of a submission or printing out or re-ordering scores which should be possible to read easily from the screen.

All centres are asked to note the following:

The PAS requires the name of the composer(s) of each piece to be given. This is an important requirement. In the case of popular music, this is rarely the same as the name of the group performing the piece, though some candidates seemed to think so. The name of the composer(s) can almost always be found on the score.

The PAS requires precise timings of each individual item of the recital. Centres should check the Specification for further information regarding this. In particular, it should be noted that 'count-ins' and click tracks beginning before the performance should not be included in the timings. (The latter hardly add to a listener's enjoyment of a performance anyway if audible throughout the performance.) It also appears that some centres are excluding from the timing short passages of accompaniment-only during a piece. This is not necessary. Long introductions are normally omitted or abbreviated anyway.

Scores should if possible be readable straight from the screen. It helps examiners if scores for separate items are uploaded as one continuous

programme, just as the recital is one continuous unedited recording. They should be in the same order as on the recording and easily readable, with all pages in the correct order and the right way up. We are grateful to the many centres who achieved all this with their submissions this year.

The Recordings

Much has been said in previous Reports about the need for care over balance in a recording. Quality of recording is improving all the time and most submissions presented no problem in this respect. However, there were some submissions where insufficient attention had been paid to balance between soloist and accompaniment. It should be remembered that the balance may sound fine in the room where the recording is taking place but still be unsatisfactory on the recording.

Some problems of balance also occurred where backing tracks were involved. This was particularly so where the candidate was presenting a performance on drum kit or bass guitar. A double bass submission also posed considerable problems for the examiner attempting to hear the solo line adequately against a backing track. Centres presenting recitals of this kind are asked to arrange for a test run and listen for themselves to hear whether or not it is likely that someone unfamiliar with the repertoire will be able to hear the candidate's playing sufficiently clearly for fair assessment of the playing.

The Joy of Music

This report has inevitably been concerned with some of the problems encountered in the administration of the Performing component for A Level Music. However, I write this with a strong sense that our team of examiners is far from losing its sense of enjoyment in listening to the singing or playing of many talented young musicians. At one of the early Pre-Standardising Meetings attended by a small team of examiners to select submissions that would be useful in the Standardisation process, one performance in particular left the whole room speechless at first before a collective 'Wow' was uttered. We were moved not only by the playing and beauty of the piece being played but also by the knowledge that this performance was recorded by a young person of the age at which

A Levels are taken. There was no question at all that this was a full-marks submission in every way.

Not many entries will provoke that kind of immediate response, though the reports that I have had from many members of the full examining team give ample indication that they too have enjoyed many of the performances that they have heard and assessed. This is often as true of recitals which, while drawing some adverse comments as regards technique or accuracy, still convey the candidate's own imprint, a sense of real involvement with the music.

That is why the requirement for the presence of an audience is in the Specification and is so important. Candidates are much more likely to give something of themselves in a performance in front of a group of listeners, also present to enjoy the music, rather than a single examiner, as in a grade exam, or worse still, just the recording engineer. That is why 'audience' is a theme running through the whole of the current A Level Music Specification. It is a requirement for Composing that the type of audience is defined and is borne in mind by candidates; and in Appraising that the effects of whatever compositional techniques are being discussed are understood by candidates, the listeners. It is a pleasure to hear a genuine response from an audience of fellow-pupils who may have greatly enjoyed and appreciated a recital by one of their peers, though conventional expressions of approval and pleasure may be sufficient whereas responses learnt at Glastonbury may not be so appropriate.

Conclusion

Finally, congratulations to all the candidates who have completed their course in this subject and good wishes to them all in their next steps in education or careers. Thanks also to music teachers, including those who teach instrumental or vocal techniques, to accompanists and to exams officers, who all have some part in the necessary preparation of candidates and in the submission of their recitals. Your cooperation with all the necessary administrative procedures is greatly appreciated.