



Pearson
Edexcel

Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2024

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

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Summer 2024

Publications Code 9MU0_01_2406_ER

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1. THE TASK

Candidates must present a minimum of one piece, performed in public, live and uninterrupted as a recital. The vast majority of submissions are vocal or instrumental solos with appropriate accompaniment or backing track, but performance as part of an ensemble or in which improvisation is an important element are also possible, as is the use of musical technology. The recital must be at least eight minutes in duration, not counting time taken for tuning and between pieces.

Overall, there was a very good response to these requirements across the whole field of candidates, with just a few problems and contraventions. Our thanks are due to those in Centres who were responsible for the assembling of the material for each candidate, including scores, recordings and PAS forms and their uploading to the LWT system. Equally to be thanked are the teachers and candidates who prepared carefully for the assessment process. Many examiners have commented favourably on the wealth of repertoire presented in the recitals and the high standard of performance in many of them. These factors, together with the Difficulty Level scaling which raises all marks for More Difficult programmes from 40 and above out of 48 to final marks of 60 out of 60, account for the very high number of candidates who achieve full marks for this component of the A Level examination.

There were inevitably a few submissions which presented problems of compliance with specification requirements. These included:

A lack of evidence of the presence of an audience. It has been pointed out in previous Reports on this component that this requirement is in line with an aspect of music that runs through all three components of the current specification, that is, the purpose and effect of musical performance, composition and appraisal in relation to audiences. Most centres arranged for candidates to perform in front of a group of people, probably in most cases fellow students, and it was good to hear in a few recordings a candidate being greeted with applause before the recital began. In such instances, it was usually after an announcement by the candidate as to what music was going to be performed. Though announcements are no longer a requirement, to begin the recital in this way undoubtedly increased the sense of an occasion and of communication, an aspect of performance which is specifically included in the assessment process under grid 3.

There was again a small number of recitals which fell short of the eight-minute requirement. Timings given on PAS forms were not always accurate. Candidates are advised to put together a programme which exceeds the minimum length by twenty or thirty seconds at least. Performances which might have been of sufficient duration in the calm of a practice session are sometimes, at least in part, taken at faster tempi in the heightened stress of the final recording. It is also clear that some centres, where backing tracks are used for popular music repertoire, are including count-ins in their timings. They are reminded that these should not be included.

There was also a small number of recitals which exceeded the required minimum duration by fifty percent or more. It is unlikely that, for example, a singer starting a new song after ten minutes or so is going to reveal any positive qualities that have not been evident before that time. On the other hand, there may be some evidence of vocal strain by then, with unfortunate consequences for the overall assessment. Tiredness is particularly likely to affect wind players, as several examiners have reported this summer. Teachers and candidates are advised to consider carefully the overall length of their programmes and the order of items within them.

A very small number of recitals included performances of pieces which were incomplete. The specification uses the word 'uninterrupted' with regard to items of repertoire, which may be seen as ambiguous by some. Whatever the original intention was in the minds of those who wrote the current specification, it must be

understood to preclude the performance of only part of a piece, even if that piece has more than one unjoined section. Of course, this is not intended to rule out pieces where those sections are clearly separate movements, as in a sonata, suite or symphony. Omissions of whole sections of a piece may affect the determination of the Difficulty Level of that item. In cases where sections of a piece were omitted, examiners were advised to limit the range of marks available on Grid 2 to Level 4 ('despite the occasional hesitation and/or omission') and to mark downwards from there.

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Pianists and singers were once more the largest groups among candidates, with the latter now outstripping the former, particularly when those presenting popular or music theatre programmes are included along with those offering classical repertoire. There were some who sang items from more than one of those genres. Orchestral instruments continue to decline in number, though perhaps the very best performance over the whole examination was of the first movement of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. A few candidates presented playing on more than one instrument. This is fine if both instruments are played with a similar level of skill, though there are no extra marks for doing so. However, candidates should be aware that recitals are assessed as a whole and a weaker performance on a second instrument, even if brief, will adversely affect the marks awarded.

The general quality of recordings was good but there are still centres where insufficient attention is paid to balance between a soloist and accompaniment. One examiner reported having to assess an ensemble performance in which the part played by the candidate was barely audible against the other members of the ensemble. Centres are urged to check that a candidate's performance is fully and clearly audible above whatever else might be involved in the production, whether backing track, ensemble or piano accompaniment. The placing of a microphone should be considered carefully and tested in a short passage of the music to be performed before the final examination recording is made. Click beats should never be heard during a performance.

Grid 1: Technical control – Technique. The descriptors for each Level list several different aspects of technique in order to cover the demands of different instruments. Coordination, breath control, diction and pedalling are all included in the first descriptor. Thus, a pianist would be assessed on coordination of the hands and use of the sustaining pedal, a singer on breath control and diction, a trumpeter on coordination and breath control, and so on.

The second descriptor requires the examiner to assess to what extent the candidate has sufficient technical ability to play the selected piece(s) of music. The third descriptor refers to sonority – as heard in tone quality, intonation and tonal contrast. Again, the way in which this applies to different instruments obviously varies. Pianists should be aware of the importance of touch on the keyboard, the most important way in which they are able to control the quality of sound that they produce. String players should be aware of the importance of the bow in affecting the tone quality of their playing.

Grid 2: Technical control (Accuracy) and Expressive control (Fluency). These two qualities, accuracy and fluency, are vital to the success of any musical performance and candidates should choose their programmes with great care. The lure of those extra marks for pieces which are rated as More Difficult should not be a consideration at all. Performances of music of which the demands are just inside a candidate's technical ability are likely to earn higher marks overall than a programme of pieces demanding an uncomfortable level of virtuosity.

Grid 3: Expressive control, style and context. Candidates should be fully aware of the varied and wide-ranging demands of the descriptors for this grid. They include control of tempo, covering both choice of tempo and consistency of maintenance of a chosen tempo within the different degrees of rubato that different items of

repertoire call for, use of dynamics, phrasing and articulation, whether notated or not, and a clear understanding of the style and context of the chosen music. This grid also reflects the level of communication with an audience that a candidate is able to achieve. That is why the presence of an audience, however small, is a requirement of the specification, as mentioned at the beginning of this Report.

Difficulty Level Scaling. The determination of the Difficulty Level of any piece is the responsibility of the examiners but several members of the team have welcomed information supplied by centres on the new PAS forms. Where a candidate offers performances of works that appear in the current lists of the various Grade Examination boards, there is usually very little problem in deciding the appropriate Difficulty Level for the recital. However, there has been quite a significant number of cases where the decision regarding overall rating of Difficulty Level has been much more problematic. This is especially so when pieces of different degrees of difficulty appear in the same recital. The specification states that ‘examiners will assess the difficulty level of each piece performed, as guided by the Pearson Difficulty Levels Booklet, and apply a difficulty level to the whole performance based on an average, although taking into consideration the relative length of pieces where these lengths are unbalanced.’

In order to avoid examiners having to make very awkward and time-consuming calculations, we have put in place the following ‘rules of thumb’:

A recital that has 4 or more minutes at Grade 8 or Diploma level, with the remainder at Grade 7, will be accepted as More Difficult (MD).

A recital that has 4 or more minutes at Grade 8 or Diploma level, with the remainder at Grade 6 or lower, or a mixture of Grades 6 and 7, will be accepted as Standard (S).

A recital that has 6 or more minutes at Grade 8 or Diploma level, with the remainder at Grade 6 or lower, will be accepted as MD.

The general usefulness of information regarding Difficulty Level supplied by centres has been acknowledged above but it has to be said that there were some errors in such information, even when the items concerned were in the published lists of graded repertoire from well-known examining bodies. Such errors may arise, for example, when a candidate plays only one movement from a larger work which is in a graded exam list or diploma list only as a whole. In such a case, and in circumstances where a given piece of music is not in any such list at all, centres should either leave it to the examiner to decide on the Difficulty Level or, if stating a level, should make it clear that it is an estimate only. All examiners are asked to make decisions regarding Difficulty Levels with great care, and as a normal rule to escalate difficult cases, particularly those that imply contradiction of a view put forward by a centre, to a senior colleague.

Finally, we have noted an increase in the number of examining bodies whose lists are being quoted as evidence for deciding Difficulty Levels. The Pearson position on this is that lists of any examining body whose procedures are approved by Ofqual will be accepted as an appropriate indication.

It should be noted that a new edition of the Pearson Difficulty Level Booklet has been prepared, incorporating many new lists of repertoire from the various grade-awarding bodies, and this will be available from September this year.

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Learners’ Work Transfer System has been very beneficial both to centres who must send their candidates’ work to examiners and to examiners who receive it, assess it and then upload the marks and EMRs on the LWA system. Where examiners have found items missing, or any other problems with the submissions they have been sent, it has usually been possible for them to rectify the situation, either through

direct contact with the centre concerned by Email or telephone, or through the Resultsresolution department of Pearson. However, it would be much appreciated by examiners if those few centres who created problems were able to give greater attention to the following matters next year:

The uploading of scores. These should be in the same order as the various works are performed in the recital. It is helpful if they are uploaded as one continuous item but if they are separate the numbering should be the same as the order of performance. Please take particular care if there are loose pages for any piece. In one case this year, page 20 from one piece was found among the pages of an entirely different piece. It is not possible for the examiner to put this right nor is it possible for only one candidate's work to be returned to the relevant centre. As a result, the submissions of all the candidates from that centre had to be returned to the centre.

Scores should be of the same editions as those used by the candidate to avoid the possibility that small variations between editions might lead to an unfair assessment of accuracy.

The use of reference recordings is allowed by the specification but there should also be a printed score of any work included in a candidate's recital if such a score exists. Professional reference recordings may be used to indicate a style of performance if that deviates from printed material in ways that are appropriate for a particular genre of music but should not be used as substitutes for notated scores where those exist. This matter has special connotations for the assessments under grid 2.

Most examiners had at least a few examples of items missing or PAS forms, even recordings, being uploaded for the wrong candidates. One centre sent everything correctly – except with no recordings at all. It is fully understood that the time of the year when this task has to be completed is a very busy one for all concerned. However, mistakes of this kind create extra work and delays in what is already a stressful period of assessment. It is hoped that with the further experience this year of the use of technology to facilitate the transfer of work from centres to examiners and the return of results from Pearson to the centres, we can all contribute to making the operation even smoother and the results even more reliable in future years.

THE OUTCOME

Tribute was paid at the very beginning of this Report to all who had parts to play in the implementation of assessment for A Level Music of the Performances created and recorded by candidates. My Report concludes with a reiteration of those thanks and congratulations, in particular to the many candidates. Individual examiners have so often recorded their enjoyment at hearing some very fine recitals.

Changes over many years have made this part of the examination a great deal less daunting for candidates. No longer do they have to go to some unfamiliar place to give their recital. No longer do they have to play or sing music at sight. No longer do they even have to give their recital in the presence of an examiner visiting their school or college. Equally, the task for examiners is less stressful in that they do not have to travel to centres (though many used to enjoy meeting candidates and seeing as well as hearing them perform) and they are not under pressure to base their assessments on one hearing – indeed, they are advised to listen to all recitals at least twice. I would like to extend my thanks to all those who took part in the Performance assessment process, particularly our Assistant Principal Examiner, our other Team Leader and the rest of the team of excellent examiners, including one working with us for the first time. We were all incredibly well-supported by Owen Wright, our Assessment Leader at Pearson.

Though there will always be some apprehension on the part of any candidate as to how they will perform on the day when the recordings are made, these changes all undoubtedly made for greater enjoyment of the whole process. Any lingering nervousness should be regarded as a positive quality, more likely to spur candidates on to perform at the best level of which they are capable, if the necessary work has been done

beforehand, than to impede their performance. On the evidence of this year's Performing for A Level Music, there is an abundance of talent among our candidates. We very much hope that they will continue to enjoy playing and/or singing music wherever they find themselves in the next stages of their lives.

Principal Examiner
July 2024

