

# Principal Moderators' Report

Summer 2015

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## Principal's Report

This year has continued the tradition of demonstrating that there are indeed some fine young musicians who take this examination, performing in a wide range of styles. This report aims to highlight points for improvement and examples of good practise for centres to adhere to.

Principally there were two areas which were cause for concern, particularly as these issues had been issues in previous examination years. They will need particular attention for future years as they affect a worryingly large number of centres:

- 1 Ensemble performance
- 2 Presentation of materials

The ensemble performance continues to present difficulties for too many centres. Too often centres have presented a second solo as the ensemble piece, which will not gain any marks for ensemble. But also the worrying aspect of using a piece of music in which solo work predominates, (and often solo work of another performer) with very little true ensemble. Further explanation will come later in this report.

The presentation of materials often presents the biggest difficulty area for moderators. While the vast majority of centres follow Edexcel's guidelines, nearly a quarter of centres fail in this area, due either to centres over presenting their materials (with the added expense of plastic wallets, paper clips etc), or the other extreme of showing a complete lack of organisation. The guidelines have been produced to help to create a hassle free method which enables centres to send off work efficiently and for the moderators to process quickly.

This also applies to CDs and while the guidelines on the presentation of CDs was updated a few years ago, too many centres have yet to update their approach to take on the new, simpler guidelines. The problems encountered from a few centres included even sending individual CDs for each performance, resulting in over thirty CD's being sent for moderation. The guidelines in short are as follows:

- 1 A centre announcement at the beginning on track one and no other announcements to be added anywhere on the CDs.
- 2 Each candidate's performance to follow from track 2 with the solo and track 3 with the ensemble, and so on for each candidate.
- 3 Any commercial recordings should be added before the candidate's relative track. So if candidate 1 had a commercial recording for their ensemble, then that would be found on track 3 with their own performance on track 4
- 4 A complete track list or the CD track box correctly filled in on the MUS100 form.
- 5 The CD should be burnt for playing on CD players not on computer.
- 6 If produced in this way most centres will be able to put the work on one CD.

## Performances

The vast majority of students were clearly well prepared and there were some really enjoyable performances showing time and again that there are vibrant candidates out there producing some excellent music. Some particularly outstanding performances were heard too, including Toccata for Organ by Sark and an Oboe Sonata by Saint-Saens, and there were a pleasing number of standard level pieces which were performed to an exceptional level, gaining the candidate full marks.

There was a good range of performances with the balance of instruments relatively unchanged again this year, though the trend away from music technology and ethnic instruments being presented for GCSE continues. Just over 1% of moderated performances were sequences or multi-track recordings, (206 sequenced performances were heard). The once very popular keyboard is reduced in popularity, partly as often pieces are played on the piano, but this year there were even fewer generic keyboard pieces. Though overall the performances which we have heard have been of a higher quality and this does bode well. The recorder and steel pans have been less popular but orchestral instruments are still holding their own. Vocalists top the survey, as they have for the past few years with 25.8% of all performances, keyboard instruments follow with 24.25%, Orchestral instruments total 23.87% with drums and guitars making up 20.81%. The final 5% is made up of ethnic instruments, realisations, rapping and beat-boxing, sequencing and recording.

All in all, it has been good to note that the balance continues without any major changes.

The quality of marking is for the most part extremely good, with most teacher-examiners making clear and valid judgements, correctly applying the marking criteria. There is a tendency to be generous, which is perhaps to be expected, however, we still have a good number of centres where the marking criteria are poorly applied. The difficulty arises where teachers have ignored some aspects of a performance, eg wrong notes need to be considered carefully – are there enough to affect the quality of the piece or are they mainly inconsequential. A candidate will not get full marks with inaccuracies in their performance.

Teachers continue to be generous with the interpretation criteria: consistency of approach is important. For example, if good phrasing is heard it will only be part of the picture as articulation should be considered too. Often it was found that a mark in the top category was given, or at the very least the top of the “good” band yet only parts of the piece displayed well phrased and articulated music: it is not enough to hear an aspect once and to credit the whole piece.

Very poor performances were rare and those that were heard clearly would have benefited from more support in the early stages of preparation. Often teachers marked accuracy down, but kept interpretation at a higher level. If a piece has many errors and the music breaks down, it is going to be difficult for it to display good or excellent interpretation.

With very easy pieces some teachers found difficulty applying the lowest criteria. A piece which consists of a single line of sixteen-bars of music using simple notes (eg

Ode to Joy, Love me Tender) accuracy is going to be easy to mark: indeed one performance of Ode to Joy heard was played with one wrong note but was given a mark in the satisfactory bracket: the piece was re-moderated to the excellent bracket. It is with interpretation where the marks would be lower as there are very limited opportunities for articulation and phrasing making it very difficult from the piece to achieve very high marks in this category.

While the vast majority of candidates the pieces were well chosen and prepared, but it is a real shame when one hears pieces performed which are clearly beyond the ability of the candidate: an earlier decision should be made before it is too late for the candidate.

Finally, it is very important to include the accompaniment for the solo performance, if there has been one composed. In most instances where the candidate performed without the accompaniment, the moderators felt that the performance had suffered, often lacking the drive and warmth of musicianship that would be expected from a complete performance.

With regard to the ENSEMBLE performances, many of the same issues pertain here. However many candidates received a lower mark for their ensemble than their solo and there is some evidence to suggest that the preparations for these are less disciplined. However, again moderators heard some fantastic performances, from some exceptional guitar bands to some fine a capella singing; too many instances to single out a performance.

However, with a little care, many aspects of the ensemble could be sorted quickly. The two main ensemble issues are firstly, the centre often not making the candidate's role within the ensemble clear (eg "guitar" in a band does not tell you much. "Rhythm guitar in a band consisting of bass, lead, rhythm, drums and singer" will make all the difference). Secondly, we return to the correct application of ensemble. Candidates are still being entered performing theatre duets, which, when performed with piano or backing track accompaniment do not properly fulfil the criteria for ensemble. The key wording is "Simultaneously sounding and undoubled" as mentioned in previous reports, a piece of 54 bars with 8 bars of true ensemble, does not fulfil that criteria and are marked accordingly.

When judging the Level of Difficulty, centre's still apply ABRSM grade levels to justify their decision. This is unacceptable and does not give a true indication for this specification, with the result that there are still far too many changes to the levels being undertaken by moderators. As a help, the level is reached by judging each of the nine criteria against the piece and when there are 5 or more descriptors that fit one level, then that is the level to be awarded. Too often teachers have chosen some aspects. Many pieces are clearly in a particular level, but those on the cusp should be looked at carefully. A few centres photocopied the page of descriptors from the specification and highlight the relevant sentences and by including this with the MUS100 form, it enables the moderator to see clearly the teachers reasoning behind their judgement.

Centres which use music technology, through sequencing and multi-track recording were fewer this year. Overall the pieces are present very well, though it should be pointed out that in sequencing the accuracy mark is very carefully applied and the quality of the final performances are based on the musicality of each sequence. Multi-track recordings were well presented too these were all excellent, but it was clear they had been taught and prepared well, as the recordings had similar positive points to them.

Centres should continue to work to improve the quality of the administration and CD preparation. This will lead to fewer queries from moderators and helps to support the excellent performances that most candidates submit.

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