

# Moderators' Report/ Principal Moderator Feedback

June 2011

GCSE Music  
5MU02 Composing Music

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## 5MU02 UNIT 2 COMPOSING

### Principal Examiner's report

This was the first year of the new specification for music and many teachers commented that they felt the new specification allowed more flexibility in approach and teaching methods. We have certainly enjoyed listening to and moderating the compositions presented to us. It is always pleasing to witness the ever-growing ability of students to compose lively, thoughtful and, in some cases, very original music.

### Changes to Unit 2

With the few changes that have been made to Unit 2 of the specification, it has been pleasing to note that they have, in general, produced a wider and more interesting response from both teachers and candidates.

The removal of the requirement to write about the given brief has had a positive effect. The students have been able to have their musical ideas rewarded, rather than their ability to write about their composition.

However, task setting or working to a specific brief is always a good idea. GCSE students need boundaries to work within and a brief should be tailored to the needs and abilities of individual students. The space for a "brief" on the MUS form gives both the teacher and the student the opportunity to add any further information about the composition. It is a great aid for the moderator in understanding the intentions and direction of the composition. The blank space on the back of the MUS form also gives ample space for supplying additional information that may be helpful to the moderator. This particularly applies to compositions that have used pre-recorded loops and samples.

It is regretted that the opportunity to provide more information was not fully utilised by many centres. It is important that the task setting for the students' compositions is made clear. Too many rather vague *write a piece in minimalist style* briefs do not provide many insights into the student's compositional thinking. Indeed, such briefs do not focus candidates' thinking and can have a detrimental effect on the finished piece. Focused and well-written briefs can provide information that is very useful, especially when awarding marks for criterion A, *Use and development of ideas*.

### Set Works

The flexibility of response provided by the three works in each area of study has produced some interesting compositions from the students. It was pleasing to see that many teachers have been using the set works as a stimulus for composition through focused listening to extracts of set works. Many of the musical techniques of particular set works are evident in student compositions. It has been particularly pleasing to hear the fusion and folk inspired compositions engendered by the stimulus of the set works from AoS 4.

Teaching the commonality of musical techniques in the set works is an important part of the process of task setting for compositions. For example, many of the formal structures in AoS 1 can be applied to all musical genres. This is particularly evident for songwriters who have been given the opportunity to explore different techniques in their field in all four Areas of Study, without necessarily compromising their own individual style. This adds another dimension to their songwriting skills.

Moderators have noted and enjoyed a greater range of compositions this year.

## **Effects of controlled assessment**

Little or no difference to the standard of students' work has resulted from the introduction of controlled assessment. On the credit side, many felt it added a more disciplined approach to composing. On the debit side, some centres produced work where all of the candidates had composed the same type of piece – almost as if the teacher had decided that they write 8 or 16 bars each lesson. Unfortunately, many such compositions were quite tedious and unimaginative.

## **Introduction of zero marks**

Zero marks were introduced as a possible outcome for each individual criterion. This mark was not over-used.

## **General comments on the areas of study**

### **AoS 1**

This proved a popular area to investigate, with many centres retaining the old favourites of variations, ground bass, rondo and ternary forms. Few candidates attempted to use sonata form or wrote a contrapuntal vocal piece. Those who did tended to be high scoring candidates. It was pleasing to note the number of candidates who adopted these formal styles into their own particular style of music.

### **AoS 2**

As with the previous specification, minimalism proved to be a popular choice. Again as in previous years, those incorporating several minimalist features such as phasing, note addition, subtraction and rhythmic development tended to score high marks. There were many examples of lower-scoring pieces, which relied upon simply building up and reducing layers and constant repetition of musical motifs.

Serial pieces continue to improve, although there were many examples of misapplied techniques.

Songs from a musical should have a dramatic stimulus and many candidates provided a short, scene-setting scenario to their composition.

Unfortunately there were a number of “pop” songs that had been re-worked in an attempt to fit it into a “musical” genre of Area of Study 2, without displaying an understanding of the style.

Again it was pleasing to note that students adopted many of the techniques from this area of study into their own particular style.

### AoS 3

The new set works provided some interesting responses. The guitar figurations of the Jeff Buckley piece, the use of ostinati and layers in the Moby song and the extended chordal structure of the Miles Davis blues piece all provided inspiration for the candidates.

It is regretted that greater care is not taken over word setting. Many pieces had a computer *ah* voice allotted to the melody line and included words that did not scan with the rhythm of the melody. Obviously, the words came as an afterthought. The better examples of songs usually had sung vocals.

Some of the more disappointing compositions tended to be repetitive 12-bar blues pieces with little variation, or dance music that demonstrated very little creative input. The use of *Garage Band* seemed more prevalent this year, with some candidates handling the program effectively. Others relied on pre-set loops, riffs and samples, which did not exploit their compositional skills or allow the teacher-examiner to award high marks.

### AoS 4

Some delightful and adventurous pieces were discovered in this section. Again, students found much inspiration in the set works.

## Scores

The standard of scores continues to improve. The additional information supplied by some candidates gave greater insight into the students' compositional intentions.

The number of poorly-written scores or lyrics sheets still continues. Some candidates are still submitting screenshots from a plethora of music technology programs, which show very little apart from instrumentation and texture.

Screenshot - when submitted - should be annotated with enough detail for the moderator to make an assessment of the marks awarded.

However, where scores were done well, they were often of a very high standard. The increased use of Sibelius software is clearly benefitting students when composing.

## Teacher Examiner assessments

Teacher-Examiner (TE) assessment was generally consistent. Most TEs attempt to justify marks using the word descriptors from the specification. Even more helpfully, TEs often gave specific musical examples of why marks had been awarded. There were also examples of TEs annotating scores at particular points to illustrate why marks have been awarded. With Sibelius scores, the *add notes* facility is a useful method of annotating scores. By complete contrast it is regretted that some TEs failed to make any comments at all.

Looking at the trends in the individual criteria the following comments can be made.

### ***Criterion A: Use and development of ideas***

Many teacher examiners awarded five marks for compositions that clearly were not imaginative within the chosen area of study. For a mark of four or five, compositions must find and maintain a style not necessarily original but essentially containing some development of ideas. Songs often suffer in this criterion.

### ***Criterion B: Exploitation of the medium***

Resources must be used appropriately. Impossible figurations for instruments and out-of-range notes make for inappropriate use of resources. The student should demonstrate how to use resources effectively and, at a higher level, how to combine resources to create musical texture and colour.

### ***Criterion C: Structure and form***

There must be a sense of proportion and direction/growth in a composition to score higher marks. A score of three is standard for a simple and clear structure, without any additional layer of sophistication.

### ***Criterion D: Melody***

A mark of three is awarded to a melody that works and has some sense of shape. This has to work with the other parts. Melodies scoring above this will have a sense of flow and show some character and style.

### ***Criterion E: Harmony/accompaniment***

Use of three chords will score three marks only if used appropriately with a suitable accompaniment style. The use of three chords used in triadic shape throughout the composition is rather functional and basic. Extended chords, modulations and thoughtful accompaniment patterns will gain extra credit.

However, use of any of these with misjudgments will result in a lower assessment. Some time spent on teaching how to write simply and effectively for the piano would address many problems that candidates have in this criterion.

### ***Criterion F: Texture***

Texture must be changed to good effect. This criterion often overlaps with Criterion B. The student should be able to demonstrate a thoughtful use of texture. Many of the set works provide fine examples of this technique.

### ***Criterion G: Rhythm***

This section was often over assessed by TEs. A rhythmic pattern should be exploited and developed to gain higher marks. Development of rhythm can be a neglected area at GCSE. Careful study of the minimalist set work will provide a useful example of rhythmic development.

### ***Criterion H: Dynamics contrasts***

Unfortunately, this is the poorest area of the students work. Compositions with dynamics simply added to obtain marks are easily spotted. Dynamics can be used to enhance almost any composition and these are often neglected.

### ***Criterion I: Use of technology***

The use of Sibelius to notate the composition is insufficient to gain credit in this criterion. Technology must form a central part of the piece, as in dance compositions. Credit will be given for sound manipulation and providing specifically generated sound timbres.

## **Arrangements**

There were few examples of these and the standard varied considerably. Careful examination of the mark scheme should precede any attempt at an arrangement. Weaker candidates simply transcribed the music, preserving all the original features. These were awarded low marks.

## **ADMINISTRATION**

Most centres provided work that was carefully presented with highest and lowest candidates included in the presentation if they were not amongst the starred candidates. The quality of recording continues to improve and the majority of a centre's work was provided on a single CD with accompanying track list. The moderators certainly appreciated the time taken to prepare each presentation.

However, when some centres fell short of this standard problems arose. Some centres did not provide track lists. Single CDs for each candidate can produce many problems for the moderator.

The new format of MUS form has given ample space for TE comments. It was appreciated when centres used this space effectively. The new track list box has also been of great value to the moderator.

With the advent of set works, very few centres submitted two compositions from the same area of study.

It is vitally important that centres check that all the MUS forms have been signed.

There were fewer arithmetical errors this year which tended to reflect the care that centres took over the presentation of work.

The standard of composing is increasing every year as students are able to assimilate musical techniques into worthwhile and meaningful compositions. The moderating team wish to thank centres for their hard work this exam season. They heard many stimulating and imaginative compositions which were a pleasure to mark.

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