
GCSE MUSIC

8271/C - Composing music
Report on the Examination

8271
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General comments

This was the first year of the new GCSE music specification (8271) and the requirements have changed significantly from the legacy specification.

The AQA specification requires that students **must** learn how to develop musical ideas, including extending and manipulating musical ideas, and compose music that is musically convincing through **two** compositions. One must be in response to an externally set brief (Composition 1) and the other a free composition (Composition 2).

The combined duration of the compositions **must** be a minimum of **three** minutes. Compositions can be composed in any style or genre to best reflect the skills, strengths and interests of the individual students.

Both compositions **must** be assessed on the student's ability to demonstrate:

- creative and effective selection and use of musical elements
- appropriate selection and use of musical elements (to the compositional intention, ie the set or selected audience/occasion)
- technical and expressive control in the use of musical elements.

Each composition **must** demonstrate selection and use of **at least four** types of musical element as follows:

- at least **two** of rhythm, metre, texture, melody, structure, form
- at least **two** of harmony, tonality, timbre, dynamics, phrasing, articulation.

The AQA specification requires students to also select and specify a brief/audience/occasion for their free composition. The same assessment criteria is be applied to both compositions.

Evidence suggests that the addition of a brief relating to audience/occasion has, for many students, added an extra dimension that has enabled them to compose music with a clear focus and purpose. In the most successful examples there have been some stunning compositions of a quality beyond what might be expected at GCSE. At the other end of the scale, there have been some compositions where the link between the music and the brief/audience/occasion has been at best, tenuous, and in some cases entirely inappropriate. It is important for teachers and students to consider both the set and selected briefs very carefully, because the suitability of the music is important to the overall assessment of the composition.

Composition 1 – Composition to a brief

The externally set briefs will always be written in such a way as to encourage students to take an individual approach, composing freely in the style/genre most appropriate to their skills and musical interests. Some schools and colleges recognised this and there was variety in the submissions, with most if not all briefs attempted within the cohort. This was not the norm and in many cases, the same brief was attempted by all the students in the cohort.

The most popular set brief by a long way was Brief 2, with moderators reporting approximately 90% of all students seen in the samples selecting this brief, or having had this brief selected for them by their teachers. It was evident in some cases that some students may have been better choosing one of the other briefs, especially in circumstances where they struggled to use musical

features that fully reflected the brief. Brief 2 required students to compose a piece of music to be used as the title theme for a new investigative crime series. Within this, there was a certain amount of room for a wide variety of individual interpretations. For example, students could have composed music for a factual investigative crime series such as 'Crimewatch', or a series investigating a series of historic unsolved cases, or a crime drama series, to name just a few. Almost all the responses seemed to be for a crime drama series, with many interpretations and many students writing programmatic details for a whole episode, with the music closely following these ideas. Some of these pieces were often overly long, with many different sections and not especially suitable for a title theme. In some schools and colleges, students appeared to have studied one or more themes from popular crime dramas, largely American, and often the responses from all the students were very similar, with similar thematic ideas, instrumentation, metre and structure, ternary being very common. Tonality was invariably minor with many being based on pedals to 'create tension'. A number of responses made use of stereotypical technological effects such as gunshots, but the most successful responses often made use of technology and sfx in more creative ways, including some very fine work set in the future for a crime series in the late 21st century, or life on other planets.

The second most popular choice was Brief 1. The brief here was to compose a piece of music suitable for live performance at the formal opening of a new venue. A second requirement was to incorporate at least a section of a given theme. Whilst almost all responses included the theme to a greater or lesser extent, some lost sight of the main focus of the brief, ie composing music suitable for *live performance* at a new venue. Some responses didn't even specify a venue and some specified unsuitable, unrelated ideas, for example, a Sonata. Moderators did however, feel that the responses to this brief were often the most successful, with some fine variation and treatment of the whole theme, and/or careful selection and extensive development of part of the melodic idea.

Brief 3 was next in terms of popularity. Nearly all responses to this brief were pop songs. Some were suitable for the promotion of outdoor pop concerts but many were simply pop songs, composed with a formulaic approach.

Brief 4 was rarely attempted. This was a shame, given that many schools use Apple computers with Garageband or Logic Pro to compose, the opportunities for the use of synthesized sounds being particularly obvious. There were however some very good submissions here, including some where students had successfully combined a number of different genres to reflect the passage of time during the 20th century and the first part of this century.

A small number of schools and colleges had, unfortunately, given one of the two specimen set of briefs to the students instead of the 2018 externally set briefs. Please note that the briefs will be released on or as near as possible to 15 September of the year of certification in the Secure Key Materials section of the AQA website. Teachers will need e-AQA access in order to view and download the paper. Examinations Officers in schools and colleges can organise this very quickly for teachers who don't have access.

Composition 2 – Free composition

The range and quality of free compositions was extremely varied, and the most successful free compositions often came from schools and colleges where students had clearly been encouraged to compose freely. In these instances submissions included piano pieces, pieces for instrumental groups including strings, brass and percussion, rock and pop pieces in a variety of styles, instrumental jazz music including some excellent fusion, pieces for small and large orchestral ensembles, film music, dance music, music for gaming and the occasional piece of folk music from a wide variety of western and far eastern cultures.

There are some schools and colleges which appeared to prescribe a particular genre for all the students in the cohort, the most common of these being the blues and minimalism. Often in these cases it appeared that the students were working in that style for the first time. Many of the blues compositions had little sense of style other than the three chord, twelve bar structure, and most of the minimalist submissions tended towards extreme repetition of rhythmically very square melodic ideas. It was rare to see compositions like this demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of composition.

There were some perceptive and imaginative audience/occasion choices, mostly in cases where students had chosen imaginative titles to reflect the nature of their music, but it was disappointing to see a good number that appeared to be selected with little thought and imagination. A large number of compositions were simply titled 'Composition 1' / 'Composition 2' and very often the selected audience occasion was simply 'a concert', 'teenagers', 'old people' (very popular for blues compositions), and, perhaps least satisfying of all, 'general listening'.

Programme note

Whilst the programme note does not receive a mark in terms of the overall assessment, it is important in that it informs the assessor (teacher) and the moderator about the students' reasons for selecting specific elements and how they have been used to make the music suitable for the given/selected audience/occasion. There were some superb responses to this that had been clearly and carefully thought through, and these were a great aid to moderation. It was encouraging to see that this was the norm, but there were some instances where some students had written little or no information. In most cases these instances coincided with work demonstrating a limited understanding of composition.

On the whole there was a sense that students really do like the ideas behind the two compositions. Many wrote enthusiastically in the programme note about the reasons for their choice of brief, and many clearly enjoyed the chance to demonstrate their particular musical interests, especially in the free composition.

Selection and use of musical elements

The new assessment model requires students to select and use at least two elements from each of the two assessment grids. These grids have been purposely designed to enable all students to compose freely and a minimum of two elements from each grid will allow for an effective, holistic assessment of the way in which the student has used the elements in combination, to produce an effective piece of music, in cases where this is appropriate. So, for example, a student wishing to compose a piece of percussion music for purely un-tuned percussion might choose rhythm, metre from grid 1 and timbre, dynamics from grid two. If the phrasing and articulation of the rhythmic ideas are important to the overall effect of the music, these elements might also be selected. The fact that the elements appear in two separate groups allows teachers to 'fine tune' this holistic assessment to take account of situations where some aspects of the writing might be more or less effective than others.

Many teachers seemed to have understood this principle and many students had selected all the elements that were evident in their composition, and had been used. Unfortunately, a number of submissions had demonstrated a lack of understanding in this respect. There were often compositions where the central and most obvious focus of the composition, and use of elements, was melody and harmony, but these had not been ticked in the Candidate Record Form (CRF), or mentioned in the programme note. In these cases students had often ticked structure/form and timbre/dynamics, and assessment did not focus on less successful elements in the melodic and

harmonic writing. In these cases the marking was often inaccurate because the assessment had only focused on the most positive aspects of the work, and not included areas of weakness that might make the music less coherent, or demonstrate some inconsistency in technical and expressive control. Moderators reported this as the most common reason that the marking was outside tolerance, and the full sample had to be moderated in these circumstances.

Whilst moderators reported many examples of assessments that were accurate or within tolerance, there were a large number that had been assessed with varying degrees of leniency. Sometimes this was because the assessments had automatically been placed at the upper end of the mark bands, but the criteria had not been convincingly fulfilled. In other cases there appeared to have been wholesale misunderstanding of the assessment criteria and the application of standards exemplified in the standardising materials and the online exemplar materials available. This was particularly evident in cases where marks had been awarded in the 18-16 and 15-13 bands but the work did not demonstrate a **sophisticated understanding**, perhaps due to a lack of coherence or limited development of ideas due to extreme repetition, the most common example being songs written in repetitive four bar, four chord structures. In these cases the music clearly required more work to sound finished, in order to demonstrate exceptional/high perception and insight, and moderators frequently needed to make adjustments into the 12-9 or 9-7 bands to accurately reflect the quality of the work.

In all cases schools and colleges are reminded that the assessment must be based on the student's ability to compose and that assessment should be based on the evidence presented in the recording and the score/aural guide/lead sheet. Moderators reported many examples where the assessments appeared to have been made in relation to the **performance** of the composition, but the student had not been involved in the performance and the additional written evidence was very sparse, giving only very limited information from which even the most able performers would not be able to perform from. The score/aural guide/lead sheet should be produced by the student and if it is not in staff notation, must contain sufficient evidence to indicate that the recording is their own composition and not the composition of those contributing to the recording. Phrases such as, 'I told my teacher what to sing so she could sing it for me' does not provide sufficient evidence. In these cases, rather than telling the teacher what to sing, the students would have been better singing the parts themselves, thereby presenting the evidence required. Remember that it is composing ability that is being assessed here, not performing ability.

Assessment comments on the Candidate Record Form (CRF)

Many CRFs were completed in exemplary fashion with individual comments related specifically to the work of each student. However, many simply cut and pasted the same phrases for every student and did not relate the specific features of each piece to the criteria when awarding marks. Some of those who did over-eulogised about areas of the composition, without taking into account less successful aspects, and then awarded a mark accordingly, leading to an imbalanced assessment. Some CRFs referred to criteria from one mark band and then awarded a mark in another. Some justified the assessments by listing all the 'indicative examples' that the students had used, regardless of whether or not they had been used successfully. There were some CRFs where there was absolutely nothing completed by the teacher at all, except the marks.

It is appreciated that not all teachers were able to attend the free standardising meetings that were offered this year, but the composing standardising will always be available online after the events and can be accessed in the Secure Key Materials part of the AQA website.

Use of technology

In the new specification great care has been taken to recognise the importance that technology plays in music, and this has been embedded into all three components to a much greater extent than ever before. There are however some common pitfalls in using technology to compose, and these need to be considered carefully. The most common issues were:

- Sibelius composed songs where the vocal part was simply played back through Sibelius and often lacked melodic character. In many of these cases there was a lack of focus in the melodic vocal writing with some of the word setting being uncomfortable. Moderators reported a large number of these and commented that it was a pity that students did not sing their own work, or enlist someone else to do so.
- Similarly, there were many examples where Sibelius had been used to compose for instruments but parts would be unplayable or outside specific instrumental ranges, the most common example being chords with three or even four notes to be played on violin or cello.
- Examples of compositions for sequence-based programmes such as Cubase, Garageband or Logic that relied too heavily on constant repetition of ideas with insufficient contrast, particularly where samples and loops had been ‘selected’ rather than composed.

Administration

It is pleasing to report that the vast majority of schools and colleges had taken great care to ensure that every aspect of the administration was completed to an extremely high standard. Unfortunately there were also a number of submissions that caused problems and delayed the moderation process. It is advised that teachers can greatly aid the moderation process by ensuring the following procedures are followed:

- CRFs should be checked to ensure they are complete with all student / teacher signatures and dates. In particular, ensure that all students have selected at least **two** elements from each assessment grid and that the elements have been selected appropriately to reflect those used in the composition. Wherever possible, programme notes should be pasted into the CRF rather than presented as separate sheets. Teacher comments relating to assessments should be specific to each individual student.
- The specification requires that the two compositions combined should be a minimum of three minutes in duration. There were a surprising number of submissions that were well under this minimum duration. Please be careful not to confuse the track length of the recording with the length of the composition. Many students failed to satisfy the minimum duration due to this, specifically in instances where there were long pauses at the start and end of the recordings.
- Recordings should be submitted on audio CD. MP3s should not be submitted. Moderators reported a variety of formats being received including USB Sticks and Data Discs containing MP3 Files, AiFF Files and WAV Files. CD recordings should be checked to ensure they have been finished properly and that they will play on standard audio equipment. Please ensure that the track numbers on the CRFs are accurate. This is absolutely crucial when students submit compositions with aural guides.
- Please ensure that each student submits the appropriate additional evidence for each composition, ie a fully completed programme note (which is mandatory) and a score, aural guide, lead sheet, or a combination of one or more of these three things, along with the recording. Examples of good practice can be accessed in the exemplar materials available

on e-AQA. Remember that the specification states, 'if composition documentation is not submitted for assessment with the audio recording, the audio recording of the final composition will still be accepted as assessment evidence. However, this will compromise how clearly the evidence supports the mark awarded by the centre, meaning centre marks are more likely to be adjusted at moderation'.

- Take great care to ensure that the marks submitted in CMS tally with the marks on the CRFs. Moderators cannot submit their marks until the centre marks are accurately submitted.
- A Centre Declaration Sheet must be included with the sample of work.
- Wherever possible try to submit a single CD recording for the whole cohort, in student order, with the set brief composition first, followed by the free composition.
- Please try to avoid sending bulky folders. It is not necessary to include binders or use presentation documents. The CRF for each student with the relevant score attached with a paper clip, or put inside a clear plastic wallet, is perfectly adequate and facilitates moderation more easily.
- Finally, teachers are reminded that all students should be made aware that the material they present in their composition should be their own original work and that plagiarism can lead to disqualification. Unfortunately, as in previous years, some examples of plagiarism were discovered. Of course, if a student decides to use, for example, a sample or a theme that can be used for variation and development, they can legitimately declare this on the CRF.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.