

Performance Studies

Advanced GCE A2 H548

Advanced Subsidiary GCE AS H148

OCR Report to Centres

June 2012

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This report on the Examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the Examination.

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CONTENTS

Advanced GCE Performance Studies (H548)

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OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

Content	Page
Overview	1
G401 Creating Performance	3
G402 Performance Contexts 1	6
G403 Performance Contexts 2	16
G404 Performance Project	21
G404 Student Devised Performance	23

Overview

The profile of candidates entering the examination in June 2012 was broadly similar to that in previous series. As anticipated, there were fewer candidates resitting units, although the entry for unit G403/01 suggests that the cohort is split relatively evenly in entry profile between January and June. Each of the units is discussed in detail in the Principal Examiner Reports that follow, but it may be helpful for Centres to note the following overarching issues.

Unit G401/01

Examiners reported an imbalance in Centre's marking between the marks awarded to the written commentaries and the marks awarded to the practical work. In the majority of instances, the marks for the written commentary fell within the permitted tolerances allowed by OCR but this was not true of the practical work where there was often significant divergence between the Centre's marks and the required standard.

The problem was most apparent in the marks awarded by Centres for the quality of the devising of the Community Piece. Several candidates were awarded very high marks for their devising skills but the quality of the actual work created was average rather than exceptional, which should not have been the case. When combined with being awarded equally inflated marks for performance skills, there was no option but for moderators to recommend significant mark adjustments to the overall marks awarded. Over-marking of practical work was the most significant cause of Centres' marks being adjusted in this series.

Unit G402/01

The most successful candidates in this unit demonstrated an ability to use the technical terms that they had mastered in unit G401/01 and this was apparent in their writing from the very outset. Although this specification offers a unitised assessment, the strongest performances in unit G402/01 tended to be from candidates who were able to make links between what they had learned in other units. It was interesting to note that of the candidates resitting the examination this series, those who had studied unit G403/01 in the intervening year had a much clearer understanding of how to handle the context of the pieces they had studied in unit G402/01. It was also evident that some candidates had not performed the work they were studying in unit G402/01 since their writing appeared divorced from a practical understanding of the piece they were discussing.

Unit G403/01

There was some improvement in the quality of candidate responses in the middle of the ability range and this appeared linked to a better understanding of the requirements of the unit. There was less evidence of focusing on individual works and a better indication of a broad understanding of the topic studied rather than the constituent works. There was, however, a similar imbalance as in previous series as to the style of writing adopted by candidates across the art forms with the most analytical work being evident in Dance and the least analytical in Music. The strongest candidates were those who were able to demonstrate the same level of analytical writing across all three art forms.

Unit G404/01

The work of many candidates was typified by an imbalance between the work they produced for the Performance Realisation and the piece they produced for their Student-Devised Performance, with the repertoire work often being the more successful of the two. Within that broad division, performances of Dance and Drama repertoire tended to be stronger than

performances in Music, which were often less impressive in terms of technique. In marking the Student-Devised Performance, the strongest differentiator was often the group's choice of commission and the extent to which their research translated into performance rather than remaining as mere historical information to be crammed into a weakly structured piece. The overall standard of performance was very similar to previous series, but with slightly less work this series that could be described as exceptional.

G401 Creating Performance

Overall Guidance:

- Structure the commentary correctly using the 'Improvise/Rehearse/Perform' structure.
- Place the discussion of the three art forms first, before the Community piece.
- Make sure that there are clear links between the art forms.
- Discriminate between candidates when awarding marks for Devising.
- In the Community piece consider overall pace and the importance of engaging the target audience through contrast and managing transitions – this is necessary for high marks to be awarded for the Devising component.
- Performance skills need to be developed to gain high marks.
- Original music needs to be more highly awarded than existing material.

Administration:

Moderators reported that the majority of Centres provide clear administration for this unit. It is important that:

- all commentaries are correctly labelled with the candidate's name and number;
- each Coursework Cover Sheet (CCS) is correctly completed with comments specific to the marking criterion and are clear and objective;
- each commentary is annotated with the appropriate abbreviation showing what marking criterion is being exemplified;
- the DVD is well produced and performances are easily accessible. Candidates need to identify themselves at the start of the DVD recording, dressed as per the performance;
- there is a written running order and identification of the candidates;
- the unit content proforma is included;
- a Centre authentication form is included.

This year there were a few instances where DVDs were not of the quality that is necessary for a public examination. The Centre should ensure that the lighting is appropriate so that all candidates can be seen and that the sound quality is such that all candidates can be heard. Since the DVD is primary evidence, Centres should do all they can to check the quality of what they submit. Moderators will always try to make reasonable allowances but if it is not possible to adequately assess the work of the candidates, the whole submission will be returned to the Centre.

The Commentary:

The commentary needs to be approximately 3,000 words long. It should be divided into roughly two equal sections dealing firstly with the work undertaken in the three separate art forms and then the discussion of the Community Piece. The style should be objective, analytical and concise, focusing on the development and understanding of the techniques necessary to devise and perform the four pieces. The art forms should be treated as complementary and not as distinct units.

Knowledge and Understanding:

Candidates needed to show that they understood the performing techniques used in the three art forms within the written structure of 'Improvise, Rehearse and Perform'. There needed to be a clear engagement with the technical language outlined in the specification for high marks to be awarded. At times Centres awarded high marks for superficial understanding. Use of key words was too generalised and candidates needed to provide specific examples to show how the key

word had been used to demonstrate understanding. For example, to identify that proxemics is indicating the power of one character over another is adequate, but it is the example of how proxemics was used (by describing the positioning of two characters in relation to each other, or one sitting and one standing, for example) that actually provided evidence of understanding. Where there are obvious consistent misunderstandings in the use of technical terms, Centres should not be awarding high marks. This happened most often in relation to music, where it often appeared that the Centre was unaware of the correct definition of the term.

The main concerns in generosity of marking were evidenced when candidates discussed lighting, costume and organisational details, or when there was little reference to how the art forms were linked. This was a particular problem when candidates did not structure their work around the performing process but instead chose to discuss each art form in isolation.

In the discussion of the Community piece moderators are looking for clear knowledge and understanding of the style and genre being used and how this knowledge informs the performance.

Evaluation of Process and Performance:

It is most important that candidates should be guided to write objectively about their work and to evaluate and analyse the process that they have been through.

The strongest candidates demonstrated an excellent ability to review and analyse their work but even at lower attainment levels there was, in the majority of cases, a good sense of process. Many candidates showed themselves able to stand back from their work and offer a degree of insight that was most creditable.

In a few isolated cases there were Centres that were inclined to over-reward evaluation of process and performance, giving credit for elements of discussion that were more inclined towards narrative. Candidates need to avoid being subjective and discussing strengths and weaknesses within the group.

Quality of Language:

It was very pleasing to see a real rigour in the marking of this set of criteria. In a few instances Centres awarded marks in the top bands where there were several examples of inaccurate spelling and errors in grammar and an adjustment to the marks awarded was recommended.

Community Piece:

In relation to the Centres' marking of the total submission, moderators reported that the majority of concerns related to the Devising and Performance Skills. Too often marks for Devising were consistently high with little differentiation between the candidates. This was despite comments from the Centre on the CCS that suggested that some candidates had done significantly more work than others. If the piece fails to be completely devised across all art forms and has no consistent style, and is not intended to affect a particular audience, candidates must not be awarded high marks for devising. This mark is not a simple 'reward' for the effort that the candidates have put in but rather the quality of what has been devised.

There were many interesting topics and venues this session including:

- a theatre that used to be a railway station for a piece about the railways;
- a band-stand for a commedia dell' arte piece;
- a town hall for a local legend;
- community centres set in the middle of a community;
- former miners' clubs for pieces about the miners' strike of 1984–85;

- the effect of flooding on a town and community in a local village hall;
- the Lowry for a piece about the artist's work;
- a smugglers' café for a piece about smuggling;
- a lifeboat station for a history of the work of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) locally;
- a local church celebrating its centenary;
- old houses of historic interest linked to local myths and legends, often involving witchcraft.

The use of historical figures was almost always successful.

For high marks to be awarded for performance skills there must be clear evidence of sustained development of technique across all art forms. A piece may still be well-rehearsed and have pace but display weak skills. Candidates who simply walk through the part and have little awareness of a range of voice and body language and how to project a character cannot be awarded high marks in relation to their drama skills.

The choice of performance project and venue was important in enabling students to demonstrate a full range of performing skills. Projects that involved Promenade Performance or close interaction with the audience on the day were often awarded unreasonably high marks. The specification provides a clear guide to how marks should be awarded and 'shock tactics' or the ability to perform in a challenging performing space are not part of the marking criteria and an adjustment to the marks was made where these were highly credited. Centres are strongly advised not to use stereotypical media imagery and conventions as starting points for pieces. These rarely allow candidates to display a range of skills and often lead to candidates performing cliché roles, rather than artistically developing and challenging themselves.

There were some examples of pieces which failed to create a balance between the art forms and which demonstrated rudimentary performances with occasional evidence of more advanced skills. Many of these suffered from being mostly drama-led, with tokenistic dance and very little music input. The most successful pieces were those that made an effort to integrate the art forms, with two or more art forms working simultaneously at various points within the piece and moving beyond simply performing a dance piece to a repertoire backing track, for example. Often, the pieces that were predominantly drama-led also suffered from weak pacing and dynamics, with little attempt to create contrast or engage the target audience.

There was some excellent work where pieces were devised around dance and original music but too often Centres credited candidates highly for Devising when the music was not original. Similarly original recorded music was often used but this then will have an effect on the Performance Skills mark that can be awarded. The top marking bands for performing are demanding and candidates do need to show a range of advanced skills in order to justify marks being awarded in them.

G402 Performance Contexts 1

General Comments

As with the last series, examiners found many excellent responses showing detailed knowledge and understanding of practitioners and their contexts, all expressed in well written accurate English.

In accordance with the specification, questions were focused on elements of performance, stylistic influences, structure and form or cultural, social and historical contexts. They were not an invitation to write all a candidate knew about a given practitioner.

Two points from the last series bear some repetition as examiners commented again:

- Where a detailed plan was provided, candidates offered a well structured response, beginning with the practitioner's general philosophy and relevant biography, although in some cases the plan was as long as the answer. Planning was most effective where it went beyond reminding of points but showed a logical progression addressing the question. Spider diagrams, mind maps and word lists had a limited effectiveness in supporting a considered discussion. The use of some or all of the language of performing arts terms for each of dance, drama and music from unit G401/01 should have been helpful, but often led to generic answers.
- Too much biographical information, particularly but not exclusively at the beginning and without reference to the question, was sometimes counter-productive. Weaker candidates often produced less clear plans, if any, and their answers lacked contextual detail. A few identified neither the question they were answering, nor the text studied. A handful started with one question and switched to another mid essay. Examiners felt these particular failings indicated poor exam preparation.

Those candidates who recognised that practitioners produce more than one text drew on a greater knowledge and understanding, provided they did not confuse works, eg *Bouncers* and *Teechers* mixed up or 'Bourne's use of multi-role'. The confusing of factual information about practitioners was increased this series.

Two hours was insufficient time for several candidates who did not finish; while others struggled to make a little go a long way. Centres are reminded that two questions are required and they are equally marked, one is not more important than the other.

If candidates appreciate that the works they studied are for public performance, then it should not be a big step to realise that elements of dance, music and drama are useful in explaining what works do, exploring their ideas and examining the actual question asked.

The use of previous exam questions in this unit is excellent teaching practice; however it should not encourage candidates to insert phrases from old questions to pad their answers without relevance to the current questions.

The sweeping generalisation is a prominent feature of many responses. If these are supported by close reference to works or related material, then they may be appropriate. Sadly, few are. To simply state a term like physical theatre, psychedelic music or traditional ballet does not by itself form a discussion/explanation. It is expected that there is knowledge and understanding of form, structure, elements and contexts.

If terms like rondo, binary, dialogue, motif have been mastered for unit G401/01, then they should be both used and spelled correctly in this paper. Some strange spellings of names spoilt quite a lot of exam work, such as Carmen Miranda being inspiration for *Car Man* and one centre where every candidate misspelt McCartney and *Norwegian Wood*.

An unexplained quote from a play, a few notes scribbled on the manuscript paper or matchstick men representing choreography do not replace descriptors of how the drama or dance or music carries meaning and/or a message through entertainment. The audience must be a constant consideration, but it is understood that where candidates have studied a work only from a DVD, that is not always obvious.

It was clear that a large number of candidates were unprepared for the basic requirements of an AS essay. Opening statements and concluding remarks were often confined to a repetition of the question, whereas the best answers opened and closed a coherent discussion of the often multi-faceted question through examples from the pieces.

The quality of written language was variable again. Spelling errors of practitioners' names, (especially Lloyd, Gershwin and Caryl), their works or the words written in the question, continue to abound. Some elementary errors of spelling, punctuation, grammar, poor or non-existent paragraphing and referencing were on a scale that is not expected at AS level.

Lower/upper case letters and the use of the apostrophe were often weak. Where/were, their/there and piece/peace were incorrectly used frequently, while terms like 'alot', 'aswell' and 'infact' are becoming widespread. Some candidates do not write in sentences.

Other howlers included: practioner, elactic, contempory, orphanedge, scenary, stacatoe, syncopashion, Carly Churchill, Steven Brecht, Becht, Bercht, Bret, Ogly Moxon, MorgenyThather, Chai Kovskky and Bude Berkely. Foreign words like *verfremdungseffekt*, *pas de deux*, *plié*, *arabesque* and *pirouette* proved difficult for many candidates.

Phrases like 'opening the vein'; 'non-esoteric' and 'serious comedy' were used frequently with neither explanation nor understanding.

Text speak and Americanisms are creeping in alarmingly, including American spellings such as color, theater, program. 'Etc' was used as a cover for failure to think of anything else to say. The use of first names for practitioners is not best academic practice.

Where handwriting was illegible or simply difficult to follow, the flow was interrupted, and some of the errors were intrusive, completely obscuring the focus of the response. Candidates who routinely produce such hard-to-read writing should consider asking for word processing facilities.

Section A

Matthew Bourne

Question 1

The focus of the question was not obviously on elements of the performing arts but they needed to play a part. It is a question about a choreographer so discussion of the elements of dance was vital. Acting skills as much as pure dancing skills clearly needed discussing. The best work was rich in dance elements, movement-specific illustrations.

One good treatment of the question was through *Swan Lake's* use of males as discussed. Some comparisons between the original ballet and Bourne's more contemporary version showed how he dramatically changed characters and themes while keeping the score.

The sexual and Royal themes and shattering stereotypes through them were popular approaches. The entertainment aspect and what appeals to an audience also were essential to do full justice to this question. Influence from Hollywood, opera and musical theatre were also valid as part of the overall discussion.

Some responses misunderstood stereotypes and took it to mean Bourne promoted them rather than 'shattered' them, particularly through 'ditzzy girls' and 'hard men'. The more able candidates discussed, for example, the boy in *Nutcracker* who wanted to play with dolls.

Some examiners noted effective discussion on paired working relationships, use of space and costume while lower achieving candidates often concentrated on gay controversy to the detriment of discussion of his skills as a choreographer. Others reported a reliance on narrative where candidates did not understand or could not address the question.

Question 2

This question focused on performance techniques and many candidates picked up on skills including both acting and dancing and achieved to a high standard (though this is not unique to Bourne), but fewer discussed the technical skills to perform elements of dance. Some missed the collaborative techniques.

The use of mime in both classical ballet and in Bourne was not picked up by many candidates. Posture, timing, musicality, attack, projection, spatial awareness, alignment, strength and extension were other technical skills that high-response candidates noted. Examiners felt that more in-depth study of the choreography would benefit candidates so they can better describe motifs and dance forms.

Many candidates discussed Bourne's particular demands, such as dancers being required to have acting technique in terms of a rehearsal methodology and creating a background to character, the ability to mime and gesture effectively, to play character consistently throughout the piece in question, to be able to play more than one role within a piece and to use facial expression and that dancers were chosen for their abilities in a range of dance styles including ballet, social dance, pedestrian dance, contemporary dance and unison.

There was some good discussion of importance of facial expression and eclectic styles demanded of performers, including ice skating. The dealing with height working was also mentioned. The mass appeal of works was generally understood along with understanding of the wide sexual appeal, without undue focus on homosexuality.

Film, pantomime, slapstick elements as inspiration were also frequently acknowledged, leading to an explanation of 'popularity'.

Shobana Jeyasingh

Question 3

The focus of this question was on the elements of the performing arts. It invited discussion of styles that she adopts, as much of what has been written about her has focused on the 'fusion' aspects of her distinctive approach.

There was recognition of Indian forms being stylised through learned techniques rather than personal expression. The diversity of contemporary Britain (particularly London) is expressed through styles in dance encompassing fragmentation, counterpoint, canon, repetition, floor work, mirroring and unison.

The full extent of the unique Jeyasingh approach was needed to do justice to the question which was interpreted both narrowly in terms of pure gesture and more broadly in terms of her entire output.

Question 4

This question focused on form and structure and opened up wide discussion on characters and narratives and how dance content impinges and connects.

Detailed understanding of characters, including their aspirations, journey and people they encounter, was needed along with a grasp of how the fullness of each character is reflected in the movement content.

Techniques needed to be identified in a specific work and linked closely to works to avoid answers that were too generalised. The relative importance of characters, stories and settings was looked for and higher performing candidates identified and linked all three.

The relationship between music and dance is fundamental and how an audience receives the mix is essential in considering the scope of her work. These dance pieces are designed to be performed: they are not abstract paper exercise, and the best answers showed understanding of that.

Lloyd Newson

Question 5

The focus of the question was on performance techniques. The question encouraged discussion of a wide range of risks: physical, aesthetic, emotional, psychological, artistic. Good answers discussed Newson's collaborative, real-life approaches, his treatment of taboo issues and shocking his audiences. Some candidates merged aesthetic and emotional responses which limited the debate somewhat; others mistook risks for difficulties.

The best work was rich in dance elements, using movement-specific illustrations, with acknowledgment of collaborative approaches.

The works tended to concentrate on *Cost of Living*, *Strange Fish*, *Enter Achilles* and *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* with a few picking up on *To Be Straight With You* and *Can We Talk About This?* More speech in the later works plus more politics and more religion were discussed, and may have led some candidates to fail to include sufficient dance techniques.

The better responses described movement and techniques, including dialogue, dancers who can act, pedestrian movement, contact improvisation, interaction with multimedia; weaker answers described works as if they were plays with no choreographic content. Most answers fell somewhere between those extremes.

A few answers became sidelined into discussion about influences, rather than risks. Paxton, Bausch, Duncan, Graham, Humphrey were interesting but not directly related to the question.

Newson's search for meaning rather than making pretty dance was relevant, and the beer glass in *Enter Achilles* was identified as a risk by many candidates, even if that was the only risk some found. Others focused on the blow up doll as risk, while better responses showed a range of risks throughout.

Question 6

The focus of this question was on cultural, social and historical content. The understanding of what is mainstream eluded a large number of the candidates choosing this question. Better answers argued against the statement of the question, demonstrating how each new work offers something in or out of the mainstream.

It was necessary to consider some aspects of social context, like shocking an audience, attitudes to issues like homosexuality, subject matter of works and characters within, in order to make the most of the question and conclude how times change. Too many candidates focused on homosexuality with sometimes thin discussion on other social issues.

Interestingly, some candidates with no real sense of social history were unaware how his earlier works were regarded as controversial/experimental at the time.

The use of dance terminology was often quite thin in this question.

Section B

Caryl Churchill

Question 7

The focus of the question was on the elements of the performing arts. There was a range of discussion about power and abuses of it, although a minority of responses failed to appreciate the extent of power as an issue in the studied works.

Some understood power without abuses, exploitation without power. *Fen* and *Top Girls* were the most used in this response. *Serious Money* was used to draw out abuse of power in terms of social class.

Dramatic means escaped many of the responses. This was the trigger to debate the dramatic techniques Churchill deploys. The best work was rich in dramatic elements, with theatre-specific illustrations.

There was a deal of reliance on the narrative as a substitute for debate using convincing quotations and references, while some interpreted the question in an academic/theoretical way, with little connection to staging needs for a performance.

Some of the descriptions of Brechtian techniques (4th wall, direct address, songs, overlapping dialogue, monologues) were well explained. There were some misunderstandings, such as one about Artoid (either Artaud or Absurd Drama) in one paper, which illustrates how candidates can sometimes become confused with practitioners.

Successful answers picked up on wider exploitation beyond individuals, and related it to government policies and contemporary economic circumstances. Sophisticated responses discussed the context of the original audiences when the plays were written, mainly in the 1970s.

Question 8

The focus of the question was structure and form. It was necessary to understand a historical situation with the characters and then explore how it was put into a play for an audience to watch.

The best responses showed clear insight into how she offers a view of the contemporary world, with *Top Girls*, *Vinegar Tom* and *Cloud Nine* being popular for this one. The idea of learning from history and juxtaposing eras and real and fictional people (as in *Top Girls*) was picked up in an account of postmodernism by one candidate.

Brecht was called upon to explain a large number of techniques used, some accurately, some less so. Devices like 4th wall, direct address, songs, overlapping dialogue, monologues, shocking audience were generally grasped. In some cases it was as if they were answering a question on Brecht.

Athol Fugard

Question 9

The focus of the question was performance techniques. This proved a difficult question for most candidates who tackled it. Some were able to discuss physicality, some dialogue, but were unable to see a relationship between them.

The physicality of the plays seemed too abstract for other candidates while some were impeded by an insufficient study of the context of the play and a reasonable extract from it.

Where a centre had seen only the DVD version of *Boesman and Lena* for example and not attempted to perform the play in practical sections, they failed to make connections between physicality and dialogue. When candidates referred to the 'reader' rather than the audience, it showed little appreciation of a live experience.

Stage directions and even simple movement of characters were not utilised by many. The use and understanding of dramatic terms were essential.

Question 10

The focus of this question was on the elements of the performing arts. Some were confused by the length of the question itself and were uncertain of what they were being asked, which led to an often narrative-driven or literature-focused response.

That being said, the better responses took it as an opportunity to explore the way characters develop, or endure suffering and pain or relate to their political/personal situations with a depth of discussion that showed they understood the full context of their studied play.

The best responses showed knowledge and understanding of dramatic devices, vocabulary and staging that makes a play.

John Godber

Question 11

The focus of the question was stylistic influences and most candidates took the chance to discuss influences on Godber's work, from classical Greek tragedy (Unities of Time, Action, Place), epilogue/prologue/monologue/pathos/hubris, Shakespeare, Brecht, Berkoff, popular culture and sport.

Some used his biographical details accurately and appropriately (he was not born in Hull) without relying on that alone to answer the question. His working class background, colloquial language, teaching experience, TV writing work were all relevant influences. Several mentioned episodic approach/fast pace/short scenes without any convincing illustrations from a play.

The point is that there is a long list of possible influences, as well as the dramatic, including verfremdungseffekt, iambic pentameter, cross gender casting, multiroling, breaking 4th wall, direct address, minimalist set/costumes/props, verse and prose, exaggerated physicality, mime, stereotypes, topical allusions, music, commedia dell'Arte.

It needed more than simply identifying a handful; it needed to show links/illustrations from the studied work to exemplify. The weaker candidates identified only one, sometimes two, influences and left it at that with little example from a play. 'Luv' was sufficient to identify 'northern-ness.'

Shakespeare led to Stanislavski for some candidates via quite unclear links, and confusion over both naturalism ('hadn't been invented by Brecht's time') and Greek and Epic theatre were hallmarks of some weaker candidates' work.

Examiners commented on several responses showing heavy political bias against the Thatcherism/Conservative governments of the 1980s, unable to separate opinion from fact. This was often indicative of a simplistic approach to the material studied. There were other reasons than economic for a minimalist approach to sets and props.

Some struggled with the 80s feel of some of the original work and seemed unaware of updating and keeping material contemporary. Often a series of small factual errors built to a sense of unpreparedness.

Question 12

The focus of the question was cultural, social and historical contexts. The key terms like celebration, energy and optimism and the working class were the essential building blocks of a good response.

Weaker candidates confined their efforts to stereotypical discussion of the working class; a few going on to include teaching/mining in their thoughts. They also tended to make very generalised statements without supporting evidence: 'all working class are miserable', and 'working classes never go to the theatre'. Where many such candidates fell down was in failing to bring in many (if any) examples from a play's speeches, characters or stage directions.

The same comment about political bias and lack of depth in considering issues, was also apparent in this answer. Some candidates spoke patronisingly about the working classes.

The better responses acknowledged the particular strengths of the working classes and their foibles and weaknesses without running others down, but used Godber's dialogue to illustrate the author's viewpoint through the drama. The sex in public and people out having a good time in *Bouncers* were illustrations of working class optimism for several candidates.

Most answers concentrated on *Teachers*, *Bouncers*, *Shakers* and *Thick as a Brick*, and one centre used *The Debt Collectors*, a script not yet widely available. A number of candidates confused answers to this question and Q12.

Section C

John Adams

Question 13

The focus of the question was on the elements of performing arts. Where candidates used a variety of pieces to exemplify their responses to set works in context, they understood the variety of styles in his output. A focus on one work revealed a particular and distinct style. Both approaches were acceptable.

Candidates who used accurate and pertinent musical notation to expand the gist of their discussions tended to produce better essays. Those without any notation at all struggled if their vocabulary was insufficient to explain with only very simple, basic narrative of content.

Aspects of minimalism were picked up, to open up discussion of popular styles, collaborations, contemporary culture, eclectic approach overall and the well-crafted orchestrations.

The question required some debate about value judgments, an understanding of 'musical languages' and sufficient music terminology to convey meaning from the works. Comparisons with Glass and Reich and others were often helpful without being confusing.

Shaker Loops, I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky and *Nixon in China* were popular examples, but some candidates found *On the Transmigration of Souls* more accessible.

Question 14

The focus of the question was stylistic influences and it was very open, inviting consideration of how he has engaged with the techniques of orchestration to revitalise and reinvent the symphony orchestra.

Adams' music brings together a number of starkly different stylistic features, from popular, gospel, jazz, minimalism to more traditional 19th century approaches to orchestration. The answers to this question were more diverse, depending on the work studied for discussion.

Adams as conductor was relevant; his use of orchestras and other ensembles, his experimentations and collaborations were all used to discuss what was generally a well-answered and rounded range of responses.

The same works as Q13 were used.

The Beatles

Question 15

The focus of the question is cultural, social and historical. Many were vague on social contexts, with historical contexts often confined to a few sweeping generalities about the 1960s. Drug culture and some music were identified by most who left aside youth rebellion, economic prosperity, the Far East, rock and roll, Elvis Presley, George Martin, US influences (Motown, Dylan, Broadway), revolutions in music, fashion, war (and peace), censorship and sexuality.

A simple timeline of what else was happening in Britain and other parts of the world 1960–1970 would help many candidates.

Some candidates either adopted or had been taught a two-dimensional worldview which was all the 'social context' they needed. 'They were all on drugs' and 'the songs are all a message about drugs' was neither accurate nor helpful. Others failed to realise that the question also demanded some musical knowledge input, and recording techniques should not be seen as a substitute for song making and performing.

The specification says that 4 songs should be studied, and this was not always done, with the result that answers were frequently without much content. Lyrical content was often avoided, musical elements were rarely mentioned and some used fragments of an old question on changes to the band's style.

At the top end, candidates achieved a satisfying discussion of more than four songs, showing contrasts and links (although some were only implicit), musical elements, understanding what was happening at the time and recognising audience responses to live and/or recorded music.

Where it was argued that music was more important than social context, candidates tended to have a better knowledge and understanding of musical terminology. They understood how the Beatles' style evolved both lyrically and musically with complex timbres and textures and modern recording techniques.

Question 16

The focus of the question was structure and form. There was some confusion about whether one song or four songs should be discussed. One song was accepted in this case if there was a detailed discussion of the structure, the story/narrative and the musical elements. Even 'structure' was difficult for a few candidates.

Most candidates realised that they needed to compare stories and musicality (keys and tempos, time signatures, instrumentation at least) of songs, particularly if they had studied more than one period of the Beatles' work, so developed the response well, without becoming distracted with biographical detail that added little. A reliance on listing of works with little musical input was not conducive to effective responses.

Where lyrics and music were understood to be part of the same creative process, as in *Eleanor Rigby's* 'short, sharp staccato notes symbolising the woman's life', a better response was presented. The evolution of the Beatles' style lyrically and musically was well treated by top candidates from simple chord structures and even banal lyrics to unusual effects, over-dubbing, multi-tracking, darker lyrics, experimentation and drug influences.

The best essays were able to identify and explain musical choices and lyrics as a way of connecting to a diverse public by conveying a frequently universal story, while the least successful lifted freely from the study guide. An understanding of music vocabulary should be given.

George Gershwin

Question 17

The focus of the question was structure and form, although mention of songs being performed is integral and worth discussing. Word painting was a phrase adopted by many to explain their knowledge and understanding (K/U) of the work.

It was possible to agree or disagree with the statement in the question. Many candidates displayed a good K/U of the musical elements of the songs, with better responses including lyrical content as part of the totality. Without some analysis of the musicality, then responses could be little more than a generalised account of aspects of Gershwin.

Most candidates effectively identified 32 bar melodies in 4 phrases of 32 bars, AABA patterns, music by George before Ira added lyrics, matching rhythm of words and music, moments of emotional changes, manipulation of pause, rubato, blues notes, chromatic notes, ascending/descending scales, pentatonic.

Where performance was discussed as a factor, this often helped answers reveal more understanding of how a song was successful because of its structure. Some candidates also referred to the performance of these songs, either originally or later in covers, and this added a new dimension to interpreting form.

Progression from rigid structures of Tin Pan Alley through to the more sophisticated later work using jazz, blues and classical influences while not forgetting lingering flavours of Tin Pan Alley, helped higher-end candidates to a better, more rounded essay.

Notation by itself meant little, but where it was explained or included within the framework of the essay, it was useful to those candidates who are comfortable with musical vocabulary and forms. Good answers showed how songs provided drama musically and lyrically and identified with universal themes and emotions.

Discussion of 'fascinating' and 'dull' was patchy, but the best used examples, such as *I Got Rhythm*, where I got is repeated 3 times and is 'either dull by repetition or fascinating as it builds and the motif ascends so it is interesting'. The poorest examples simply argued that the greatest works were dull, and '*Summertime* is a lullaby so it sends you to sleep'.

Question 18

The focus of the question was elements of the performing arts. It needed candidates to understand that the songs were created to be performed in public. Rhythm, melody and harmony had to find places in all discussion about Gershwin songs, and it was only in a small number of papers that they did not.

Agreement or not with the question was not obligatory. What was needed was a discussion of all or most of the elements of the recognisable Gershwin-style melodies and the influences that led to their creation. Biographical information by itself was not always helpful to candidates who relied on it overmuch.

A certain amount of value judgment was encouraged for this question, but provided it was supported by illustrations from songs, that was acceptable. Thorough working knowledge of lyrics, melodies, harmonies, rhythms and contexts was essential, but it was acceptable to highlight melody above other elements.

Word painting was used in many good responses, songs providing music and drama identified with universal themes and emotions. That singers were required to inhabit characters and emotions within songs and bring light relief in dark times, was acknowledged by some. Gershwin's melodies enhanced by Ira's lyrics was also key in the better answers.

G403 Performance Contexts 2

General Comments

The understanding that this unit is a discussion of a topic through a selection of works is finally taking hold. An increasingly higher proportion of candidates are attempting a discussion around the question, comparing ideas, techniques and style, across and between examples, rather than merely moving from work to work. Discussion of the topic as a whole is also improving. Weaker candidates still write about works rather than about the topic area. A minority of Centres still prepare candidates with a limited range of either practitioners, works or both, though that is now rare.

Plans often betray the approach to the study and thinking about the answer. These plans are usually characterised by a list of works, less now in a chronological order fortunately, but with no sense of overview of, and conclusions about, the topic area.

There was also a noticeable increase in the attempts to show understanding of dramatic analysis, featuring discussion of character, dialogue and action, with some useful comparative illustrations in the musical, which has been absent in the past.

Dance continues to be the strongest art form represented by understanding of technical language, but often used generally rather than tying the technical knowledge to an actual exemplar occurrence. In some instances there was some excellent exemplification particularly around the work of Bruce and Bausch in both Post-modern Approaches and Politics and Performance topics.

Response in the music area continues to suffer from a lack of detail in musical analysis, with the focus on the lyrics, particularly in Post-modern Approaches and Politics and Performance topics. However, it is positive to see that more candidates are attempting to use musical terminology to explain techniques and uses to which music is put, in the different topic areas, including Performance in the Far East.

The work of Reich and Bowie worked exceptionally well as comparative examples of the Post-modern in one Centre, particularly for a discussion about the use of technology within the context in which both were writing and how this had aided the compositional process. This led to some very sophisticated analysis.

Many candidates have lost sight of the key words from the language of performing arts explored in unit G401/01. Using these and other words as building blocks is a good starting point. Use of specific dance, drama and music vocabulary to describe works is the key to a confident and knowledgeable response.

Best responses took note of performing arts elements, note connections and contrasts, used paragraphs for each new idea, rather than each new practitioner. They wove a response around works back and forth and avoided a pre-ordained journey through a set of extracts just dealing with one art form after another.

In a few cases, reading the handwriting was difficult to the point of being impossible. If words look as if they may be incorrectly spelled, then they probably are.

Quality of Language:

With the general improvement in the discursive style of response, in terms of content and approach, the style of writing was improved, but there were still some very simple errors.

Spelling of key practitioners, terms, characters and works incorrectly often marred a competent answer. Practitioner, Bernstein, Hammerstein and Sondheim are all common errors.

In order to improve further on style of language used in the answers to questions, Centres are advised to discourage candidates from the use of the following: *'the works that I have studied'*, *'the nine extracts'*, *'the next production/practitioner to be discussed...'* This tends to indicate a limited view of the topic, when the extracts should be used as examples of the studied topic, not as 'set works' in themselves.

Similarly, some candidates use a very 'chatty' style of writing with colloquialisms, slang and direct or rhetorical questions that ask the examiner to decide – *'surely there can be no better musical than...'* or *'I think Berkoff is brilliant, don't you?'*

Candidates should make their own opinion clear and by the very fact that they are writing it, there is also no need for *'I believe'*, *'It is my opinion..'*, *'I think...'*.

Question 1

This question required a greater focus on audience reaction and perception of meaning as well as practitioner intention. A large number of candidates answering this question made no reference to the audience at all. The best responses realised that works are made to perform, that the audience reaction is often part of the process, such as in Anderson's site-specific work, or live music and theatre. Similarly, it was only in the higher level responses that recognized the change to the audience as the 'consumer' of art and therefore making their own 'meanings'. The blurring of perceptions of high and low art was a popular discussion area to clarify meaning and depth to works.

Whilst many candidates often will suggest that post-modern practitioners seek to 'shock' the audience, few associated this with grabbing the attention of the audience to 'reach' them. Many candidates could only quote two at most three approaches used by practitioners and often had a set response that was, in the better versions, turned to fit the question. Most answers strongly 'defended' the area they had been studying against what they saw as challenge to post-modern approaches. Only a few candidates agreed with the suggestion in the question, but were able to argue that the connection with the audience was more important to the practitioners than creating spurious meaning, which was what Modernism was all about, after all. These answers demonstrated a keen understanding of some of the common approaches, but more significantly showed confidence in their broader understanding of the topic area and thus gained some of the highest marks.

Question 2

Less popular, but a given structure, unfortunately tended to be forgotten for an 'everything-I-know' approach. Candidates were often seeking an 'historical' angle to represent that aspect, for example, the dinner guests in *Top Girls* or Berkoff's use of 'Historical Shakespeare language'. Few seemed to realise that the last 50 years is now history. Similarly, only the higher level candidates really engaged with the 'cultural' beyond 'drugs' in the Beatles songs and more overt sexuality or 'shocking' language. The ways in which the works reflected a changing cultural world, even technologically, were not taken up by many. Similarly, the levelling of society reflected in the blurring of popular and high cultural art forms was not used as effectively as it could have been.

The fact that certain works reflect their contexts was noted by the better answers to produce good discussions about life reflecting art and vice versa, or the power of performing in the social, cultural life of the people.

The candidates that had only studied three practitioners, as required by an older version of the specification, were at a disadvantage with regard to breadth of their answers. These candidates also did not show adequate knowledge and understanding of the relevant features of Post-modernism and also mismatched knowledge to irrelevant examples from works studied. The question did invite a number of different approaches to be considered, and those who realised there are many techniques to use, did better. Those who confined themselves to one or two, such as collaboration or intertextuality, were rarely deep enough with their analysis to score highly. It would appear that some candidates still do not treat it as a topic but as works studied in separate art forms.

Question 3

There were some very strong responses to this question, involving comparative discussion across a range of exemplar works and the art forms. Use of relevant vocabulary was treated as shared understanding with the reader, letting the examples show clear understanding on the part of the candidate. Informed phraseology pertinent to the topic included, *propaganda*, *didacticism*, *moral judgement*, *objective criticism* and *subversion of a dominant ideology*.

Without any reference to ‘the works I have studied’, at least one answer assumed that politics and performance was being discussed in the context of the question and that the works referred to were merely examples of a point that was being made for the benefit of explanation, proof and elucidation.

Candidates often were able to show knowledge of what political performance is, but struggled to compare the work of practitioners, even when some had clear links with one another. Higher level candidates were able to discuss collaboration of artists in the creation of work and the ways in which the art forms could be manipulated to generate support for a cause. It was recognised and evidenced that music was particularly useful art form for the influential transmission of ideas.

Many discussed the issues raised by practitioners, but not the treatment of them.

There was a greater degree of very sound comparison across examples to which reference was made and this is something that generally has improved across all areas.

Question 4

Answers to this question showed that candidates had a secure awareness of politics as applied to some examples, but often did not have the overview to be able to piece it all together. Some candidates did not grasp that the political landscape of Fo or Shostakovich was not the same as Marley or Dylan. Sweeping generalisations often replaced analysis. The impression that some candidates appear to have is that Margaret Thatcher, besides everything else, was personally responsible for the rise of performers criticising government. Centres should encourage candidates to appreciate that whilst the specific context is important to be understood, the wider view should also be considered.

Many understood the political motivation behind the works studied and were able to give examples of techniques used by practitioners, for example, Jooss’ use of masks and gloves for the politicians in *Green Table* and the use of the ABA structure to show a repeated cycle of political events.

Best answers to this question identified certain common threads in this topic area that are recurrent such as, fighting for rights, exposure of injustice and corruption, war and conflict. They were then able to use the specific context of, for example, the miners’ strikes of the ‘20s and ‘80s with examples, as part of a discussion of changes and similarities in the political landscape. One very good answer picked up on the increase of concern for sustainability in the latter part of the period, using *Still life at the Penguin Café*, but then reminded the reader that these concerns had also been part of the agit-prop movement of the ‘40s and ‘50s with examples from *Uranium 235*.

Question 5

Whilst some background to the Musical may have been relevant in showing the ways in which separate art forms came together, there were many candidates who took the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of operetta, minstrel shows, revue, burlesque and vaudeville. Few could exemplify any of the forms to indicate some depth of knowledge and what for some took three to four pages, could have been said in less than half a page.

In some cases and despite advice to the contrary, far too much emphasis is clearly being placed on knowledge of what gave rise to the American Musical in the Twentieth Century, rather than exploration of the genre itself. The use of that background context is most effective when it is referred to as part of the discussion of musicals, eg *Gypsy* or *Chicago*.

This question did not require a 'chronological catalogue' approach, nor did it need extensive background context, but sought an understanding of the ways that the art forms work together to serve the musical as a whole. The strongest answers did not necessarily acquiesce in agreement with the statement, but could demonstrate, with evidence, that, whilst integration could be powerful, it wasn't always necessary to have all three powering away at the same time.

Some candidates extended the debate about the 'best' musicals, which the question encouraged, but often this was heavily reliant on knowledge of a very limited range of practitioners and musicals and consequently became shallow and opinionated, without example or knowledge to support.

Question 6

The quotation taken from Howard Dietz's lyrics to the song *That's Entertainment*, encouraged some comprehensive answers that retained the focus of how real life is represented in the American Musical. At times, candidates felt that it departed from a real world, eg Todd's revenge, but at the same time justified the 'dream ballet' in *Oklahoma!* as a manifestation of daydreaming. There were many references to the 'issues' that are evident in some of the musicals, but the higher grade candidates saw that normality was an essential part of the American Dream, wrongs were righted by the conclusion and life, despite the incidents, goes on. Examples of everyday movement and gesture were used to support the notion of things that 'happen in life' and songs, possibly the least 'life-like' of all the aspects of the musical, were discussed in terms of their expression of emotion, thoughts and ideas, as well as those that 'naturally' replace the dialogue.

The question also offered opportunity for candidates to demonstrate contextual knowledge of the period, as it is reflected in the musicals. So, Sondheim's *Company* reflected the changing attitudes to marriage in society and also the acceptance of an increasingly overt gay community.

Some responses made the claims of this societal reflection, but it was the stronger candidates who could support it with evidence from the action, dialogue, character and musical style. In dealing with shows like *Chicago*, some candidates got rather lost in the chronology. Whilst most were content to point out that it was set in Prohibition times, without being too clear of when that was, and that it raised issues of corruption in high places, only one or two candidates were aware of how it might reflect the general post-Watergate cynicism in 1975 when it opened on Broadway.

Question 7

The answers to the questions on Performance in the Far East continue to improve. Notice had obviously been taken of the comments in previous reports about sufficient breadth as well as depth in styles and forms broadly representative of this topic area. An excellent answer combined a comparative approach with a convincing overview of performance styles in the Far East, using examples from the national styles to support the argument. The span of reference works was impressive with examples taken from traditional forms and contemporary interpretations. The most successful candidates gave the impression of real knowledge and understanding of what performance in the Far East involves, rather than merely demonstrating knowledge of a range of forms.

Question 8

There were no answers to this question.

G404 Performance Project

Many candidates appeared much more at home when performing repertoire, and in many cases these pieces received higher marks than the devised work. Some candidates clearly benefited from the opportunity to operate in a favoured art form and to explore the work of an artist that they were committed to.

The range of repertoire performed was more diverse than in previous series with less dependence on a narrow selection of works studied for unit G402 (Performance Contexts 1). Extracts were often drawn from a wide variety of pieces, which provided a richer and more diverse experience for the candidates in those Centres. A number of the most exciting and skilful performances were of distinctive, less commonly chosen works, perhaps reflecting candidates' commitment to the artist and desire to develop their own talents in response to the artistry of the original.

Group size and length of pieces

There was a much higher number of solo performances this series, which clearly proved a successful approach for many, perhaps allowing some talented candidates to concentrate hard on sensitive interpretation and rigorous rehearsal. However, performance work can also benefit from the opportunities for interaction and rapport that were more plentiful in group pieces. Most pieces allowed the required length of three minutes' exposure and few exceeded the maximum length. Some solos, however, were closer to two minutes in length and as a result faced the risk of being self-limiting.

Performance skills

Many candidates had a clear understanding of the style of their chosen practitioner and in most cases presented work that demonstrated this. Most candidates chose to perform within their strongest art form and had been encouraged to select repertoire that suited their strengths. In a few cases, however, better guidance could have prevented candidates performing in a piece that did not help them play to their strengths.

Dance pieces

There was a good overall standard of performance of dance repertoire, with good adherence to notation and fluency and clear evidence of committed rehearsal. The most popular practitioners continued to be Matthew Bourne, Lea Anderson and Christopher Bruce. The glitz and glamour of Bourne's choreography has perennial appeal and extracts from several of his works were selected, especially *The Nutcracker*, *The Car Man* and *Swan Lake*, with Rita's solo from *The Car Man* being a very popular choice. Lea Anderson's *Flesh and Blood*, perhaps a classic now of modern dance, was a popular choice, as was Christopher Bruce's *Ghost Dances*. Increasingly popular was the choreography of Bob Fosse and Jasmin Vardimon with their links to work studied in G403.

Drama pieces

Standards in drama were more variable, and there was a good deal of mid-band work that suffered from pedestrian pacing, and a sense of being crafted for television rather than for the stage. The most popular practitioners continued to be Steven Berkoff, Caryl Churchill and John Godber. Berkoff's *East* proved extremely popular with candidates, although the accent work and physical demands of some of the dramatist's style proved too much for some candidates. There were fewer performances of *Metamorphosis* in this series possibly because the emphasis on physicality was most in demand here. Most candidates caught some of Berkoff's manner of extreme character creation, physicality and vocal technique, but found it difficult to achieve the full energy that is required, while maintaining control and precision. Vocal clarity was often lost, and there was frequent lack of conviction and detail in mimed action.

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* was the preferred text, and this was most often an excerpt demonstrating the quarrelsome relationship between Marlene and Joyce. In the strongest performances, the acting was marked by good variations in pace and shifting mood, with overlapping dialogue very well handled, and the emotional turmoil and personal politics vividly conveyed. Weaker performers simply talked over each other with little sense of the intricate pacing required.

Godber's *Teechers*, *Shakers* and *Bouncers* were a little less in evidence than in previous series but were still a popular choice for candidates, despite producing some of the weakest work seen this series. Jim Cartwright's *Road* increased in popularity, possibly as a result of having been studied for the G403 topic Politics and Performance. There were some good performances of extracts, although the challenges of making the characters believable required considerable maturity on the part of the candidate.

Music pieces

Almost all music performances involved singing and the best singers – though relatively few in number – captured the life of the songs in terms of melody and rhythm, as well as their distinctive character and appeal. There were several expressive renditions of the now-classic canon of Gershwin songs, which were generally performed with respect for their individual feeling and sense of style, often under the influence of later versions.

However, as in previous series, performances of music repertoire was often of a lower standard than either dance or drama, and in spite of some good audience address and communication, the reality was that some candidates could not sing in tune. Although a popular choice, the weakest performances tended to be of Beatles numbers, quite often involving guitar accompaniments of variable quality. Weaker candidates tended to lack qualities of voice and communication to audience that would have strengthened their performances. Some very unfortunate candidates were drowned out by their backing bands, taken out of their register by their backing tracks, or taken out of their sensitivity by clumpy piano accompaniments.

The songs of contemporaries such as Adele and Lady Gaga were well represented. Candidates spoke of being drawn to Adele's voice and its quality of 'feeling real things', and thus aimed to use their own voices to express situation and emotion in the chosen songs, also in some instances trying to capture her intonation and phrasing. In songs such as *Take It All* and *Hiding My Heart Away* performers achieved force and expressive power through vocal experiment combined with rhythmic control. Lady Gaga's *The Edge of Glory* received some enthusiastic performances that conveyed a good sense of the force of the song. The narrative dimension of the music videos also captured the imagination of many candidates such as in *You and I* where they aimed to convey the style of Lady Gaga and the story of the piece, capturing some of the her persona and effect, and experimenting with vocal quality as the song unfolded.

Combined art form pieces

These were invariably songs taken from the canon of Musical Theatre, and especially from Kander and Ebb's *Chicago*, resulting in 'the name on many candidates' lips' being Roxy although *Mein Herr, Willkommen* was also a very popular choice, as was 'If they could see me now' from *Sweet Charity*. These were mostly supported with costumes, props and staging, which enhanced the performance and were the most popular in terms of combined arts performances, with several candidates offering dance and music performances.

G404 Student Devised Performance

General Comments

The standard of performance work seen was extremely similar to that in previous series, with similar strengths and weaknesses.

There was plenty of evidence of research into the commissions chosen, although the translation of this into performance was much more variable, often because groups had simply amassed too much material to use and struggled to select and refine ideas. Some struggled into the discussion with the examiner burdened with extensive working journals, the weakest more akin to a group scrapbook. Examiners reported that candidates often confused the collection of material with performance research, whereas the best pieces often investigated the performative possibilities of small amounts of material. The best work showed good integration of the art forms, had well-handled transitions (such as, for example, use of sounds/musical underscoring in blackouts) and had a sophisticated approach to the ideas and concepts they chose to explore.

The best pieces were characterised by a blend of rigour, imagination and impressive levels of technique, demonstrating an excellent balance between working within the commission and approaching it creatively, allowing a real integration of the art forms that allowed the performance to evolve through a rigorous process of development. Weaker pieces often lacked critical self-evaluation and relied on weak approaches to drama: address to audience, a commonly used device, lacked polish and confidence, with candidates quite frequently stumbling over their lines, or even reading from a script. Role-creation often dealt in simplistic stereotypes when needing to convey the brutal realities of racism or class power. Sometimes a sequence of short scenes emerged, with a fragmentary effect, possibly slowed by frequent scene changes as well.

Whilst a good number of candidates displayed strong commitment to role in performance, many performances lacked discipline. Several potentially strong pieces were marred by lapses of concentration that took, variously, the form of looks, knowing smiles or grimaces between performers on set and when visible off-stage; others were just distracted by their hair, pulling their trousers up or making other fidgety adjustments to their costume.

COMMISSIONS

Images

1 *The Census at Bethlehem* (1566) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

This was the least popular option and was chosen by very few groups. Those that did focused helpfully on the way Bruegel's picture set the census in sixteenth-century Flanders, thereby creating the potential for either a parallel story or for some playing with the historical time line. Weaker groups tended simply to re-create characters from the story, which resulted in something more akin to a primary school nativity play.

2 *Nanny, Small Bears and Bogeyman* (1982) by Paula Rego

The most popular of the 2012 Commissions, accounting for almost 25% of the pieces submitted for assessment, Paula Rego's picture presented a wide variety of opportunities as well as pitfalls for the unwary candidate.

The picture's central themes of a knife and a bogeyman, the nanny and the bears found their way into most pieces in some form, with the identity of the bogeyman becoming something of an obsession at times. Strong pieces often made full use of the potential of physical theatre, movement and soundscapes, generally creating atmosphere and conveying a strong sense of menace, whereas weaker pieces tended to generate into one-dimensional snapshots of child abuse, innocence, parental pressure, peer pressure, controlling relationships and violence.

Some very successful groups were influenced by Theatre of Cruelty, creating some strong performance images through repetitive movement (occasionally based on the knife image in the painting), expressionist acting, and visual resources that included height, fusion of performance and audience, ropes and set, occasionally further enhanced by sound. Some performers demonstrated some very striking moments of facial expression and body image, recreating the grotesque beauty of Paula Rego's work.

Other groups focused on the back-story to the picture and looked into the autobiographical elements of the picture, which was inspired by Paula Rego's friend Elias Canetti, whose nanny's boyfriend always threatened to cut out the young Canetti's tongue. The integration of this story into the performance piece was often variable in terms of success, especially in instances where the programme notes gave little detail of the link between the picture and the performance. Although there are sophisticated levels of meaning within the picture, weaker candidates focused on superimposing a devised imagined storyline, which often served to confuse.

Political Struggle

3 *The Titanic* – a hundred years since it sank

The commission generated a good number of performances, which ranged from highly physicalised explorations of the final moments of the *Titanic* to unimaginative pieces that sought to recreate the 1997 epic disaster film of the same name. Some candidates unwisely used music from the film track to underscore their drama, giving the work a rather tacky feel.

The strongest groups were those that integrated the most physicality into their performance. Movement, shape and perspective featured in a number of stronger pieces such as, for example, representing the iceberg through re-configured tableau shapes created by the performers, and the final remembering of the lost passengers, now equal in death, through the shoes discovered scattered over the seabed.

The title of the commission allowed some ambiguity between the historical situation of the sinking of the ship and views of its significance a century later. Many weaker candidates took an historical approach to their work but which frequently tended towards a soap-opera style, often inventing supposed characters on the voyage, or in other cases present-day relatives of those who were on the voyage. A few groups took an interesting approach by exploring the Belfast connection: the *Titanic* as the pride and shame of Belfast, the decline of ship-building, the Troubles and then regeneration in the city of today, which offered a historical exploration of the hundred years since the sinking of the ship.

4 *The 1936 Olympics*

Given the media attention on the London 2012 Olympic Games, the popularity of this commission was no surprise. The theme that emerged most frequently was the Nazi response to the 1936 Games and possible links with racism in sport today. Some very good work focused on the Games as a propaganda exercise on the part of the Nazi state including the circumstances surrounding the 1936 Games, such as the round-up of the Roma people in Berlin and Hitler's dealings with Jesse Owens. The strongest pieces gave a vivid sense of political forces at work and the powerful athleticism of the Olympics was frequently conveyed through inventive, sustained dance and movement – perhaps inspired by DV8 in *Verbatim* – well fused with drama,

imaginatively suggesting possible connections between sport and war. Weaker pieces took the location of the Games – Berlin – and seemed to recycle the Berlin Wall commission set in 2011. Some weak pieces were swamped with faux German accents and one-dimensional running images more suited to a trailer for *Chariots of Fire*.

Some very successful pieces explored the relationship of the Games to the oppression of the Jews and the Holocaust, involving, variously, devices such as repetitive motifs – swastikas, Olympic rings, the German National Anthem, Jewish stars and Nazi salutes although these sometimes needed more development. The use of the performance space was often very creative, such as in one piece that used traverse staging, formed by the racetrack, with a drum at either end, helping the audience to concentrate on the action.

Poetry

5 *Snow Joke* by Simon Armitage

This was a popular commission, with candidates responding very well to the poem's narrative twist. Many candidates tended towards an animation of the suggested relationships in the poem, or those that candidates inferred from the poem. Some of these were predictable: the philandering central character (often portrayed as schizophrenic and facing breakdown), the wife, the child(ren), the people in the pub and so on. The majority of the pieces took a linear narrative approach, which often produced predictable endings as the car was discovered. There was a good deal of attempted humour, mainly derived from the poem, often interpreting the commission with some zest, experimenting creatively with a mood sequence: joke – sadness – black joke.

The strongest pieces often experimented with the time line of the piece, providing prolepsis at points and taking the audience on a narrative journey where the end result was less predictable. Other strong pieces worked on the physicality implicit in the poem: the car stuck in the snow and being dug out, the blizzard, the motif of drinking from the flask, the illicit relationship that led to the situation.

6 *Chopin's Waltz No. 7* by Sandeep Parmar

This was less popular as a commission, possibly because the poem was less obviously narrative and some of the images more broadly sketched. Whilst not encouraged by OCR, some candidates wrote directly to the poet to explore the poem's meaning.

There was a good range of response. Weaker performances tended to focus on a random set of images from the poem – the jam, the dinner table, cigarettes and a piano, often with few links between them. More effective attempts included one that focused on three Russian dolls found in the cellar in the poem, thus setting the whole poem narrative in Russia, both before and after the revolution. It used slides and placards to tell the audience what was going on in key events in Russia, including Russian roulette. Whilst this was an interesting and coherent piece, it had clearly moved a long way from the commission, and highlighted the tension between producing a creative piece and working within the boundaries of the commission.

Stories

7 The story of The Blue Jackal from *The Panchatantra*

This was a fairly popular commission, which generated a range of styles, although few of them reflecting the cultural diversity of the original story. As in previous series, the stories themselves were often helpful to groups in providing a ready-made structure but provided many challenges as to how to adapt that structure creatively. The majority of pieces were faithful in taking aspects of the story and weaving them into their piece, generally in the order they came in the original.

The interpretations of the story were many and various, however, but a particular trend with this commission was for candidates to feel they must all play the central character, often with the use of a prop such as a hat or a sign around the neck to denote whose turn it was to play the jackal! This inevitably produced weak performance work.

Some potentially more imaginative approaches to this commission did not reach full fruition, either. For example, in one piece, the Indian folk tale was transformed into a narrative of deceitful drug-dealing, which was 'walked through' rather than fully performed, and restricted by the introductory and closing rock music that undermined, rather than reinforced, the style of the piece.

There were some very good parallel stories that set the jackal story alongside a modern parallel, as well as several allegorical approaches, which were more variable. One group linked the life of the Blue Jackal, his trials and tribulations and eventual leadership to that of Saddam Hussein, focusing particularly on his early and unhappy childhood. In another piece, a parallel story had been imposed, bizarrely contrasting the story of the Blue Jackal with the life story of Michael Jackson. Whilst it was possible to see the connection, the execution of the idea (a TV interview with MJ on Jackal TV and a Primary School classroom) was clumsy and lacked imagination.

8 The story of Aladdin as found in *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*

Based on the popularity of similar stories in previous series, examiners were surprised that Aladdin did not enjoy the same popularity this series. There were inevitably many children's pieces, some of them very good and some that created strong performer-audience interaction through promenade theatre, allowing a more creative use of performance space.

Several groups attempted to create a piece based on a Pantomime style ('oh no they didn't'), which became something of a distractor, except on the odd occasion that it was well handled. The cultural dimensions of the story occasionally shone through, as in quirky pieces based around Scheherazade's storytelling. Other groups used aspects of World Music to colour the time and setting of the story and also varied the narrative structure.

Performers

9 Marcel Marceau

This commission was quite popular with groups who had developed a movement-based approach although often the story of Marceau's life tended to be the central inspiration rather than the mime technique for which he became renowned. Examiners reported that the strongest pieces were inevitably the most physically powerful, as could have been anticipated from the subject matter. A number of pieces showed evidence of extensive research into his biography but the translation into performance often lacked sophistication, whereas the best demonstrated excellent physical skills and creative imagery.

Some of the best pieces played intriguingly with routines from the mime artist's exquisite performance art, setting these against key events and themes from his life, particularly the persecution of the Jews in France, and the supposedly unknown character behind the mask. Themes and movement sequences weaved fluidly together to reinforce a view of Marceau as a surprising, strange and yet-to-be discovered artistic personality.

In some very strong pieces, candidates had obviously made huge efforts to learn Marceau's mime style and related their narrative through mime and movement, sometimes interspersed with original songs and dance and sparse but well-crafted dialogue. Costumes tended towards the simple, often predictable, and appropriate and sometimes imaginative make-up was often used.

10 Ella Fitzgerald

This commission attracted a good range of responses, especially from those candidates who were strong, confident singers. A common failing with this commission was the misplaced democratic decision for the entire group to play Ella at some point in the piece, generally by wearing a name around the neck or a symbolic item of clothing. Most pieces incorporated several aspects of the singer's life and times, although the weakest groups plodded through these, the monotony broken only by being interspersed with recorded snippets of Fitzgerald's songs. Reliance on recorded versions of Ella Fitzgerald's songs was symptomatic of weaker work, and those that chose to mime the recorded versions were seldom effective.

Some weaker pieces centred on detailed aspects of the singer's life: her mother's death, the subsequent abuse by her stepfather, and unfolding events, including her career successes, and rounded off with an effective retrospective. More effective pieces interspersed these with interpretative dance and the use of original movement tableau interspersed with naturalistic dialogue, which provided a more engaging experience for the examiner and the audience.

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