

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

MUSIC

H543

For first teaching in 2016

H543/03/04 Summer 2024 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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General overview

The composing component for H543 Music A Level offers candidates a wide choice of creative pathways in which to show their individual creativity and ideas.

For both Composing A and B, candidates are required to respond to a brief set by OCR, and to respond to a self-written brief of their own choice. There is no requirement for Sections 1 and 2 to be contrasted. The range of styles and idioms submitted in 2024 was widely varied and resourceful.

In Section 1, candidates are required to choose one from the set briefs relating to each of the six Areas of Study.

In 2024, Set Brief 5 proved to be very popular with candidates. The requirement to write a programmatic piece which investigated both a season of the year together with a location of choice, gave candidates many opportunities to explore a wide range of instrumental techniques and narrative ideas. Set Brief 1 was also popular with candidates and gave the opportunity to write dramatic and stylistic operatic overtures. The other set briefs showed imaginative responses too, with Set Brief 6 showing a range of different approaches from original jigs and reels for one or two instruments, to large scale orchestral suites. The Area of Study 3, instrumental jazz brief examples often showed extensive knowledge of Benny Goodman as did Area of Study 2 and the songs of Billy Holliday. There were a small number of responses to Area of Study 4, Baroque Religious music, and these showed creative engagement with the style.

In Section 2, candidates are required to write their own brief which can be in any style, genre or idiom. Ideas were varied and creative. Candidates chose either styles with which they already had an affinity or chose new genres to explore. Some pieces explored fusion ideas and others were experimental. This section of the component allows candidates complete freedom to express familiar and unfamiliar challenges.

In Section 3, which is completed only by candidates enrolled in Composing A, candidates are required to write three short exercises which need to be focused in area of study and the chosen element. Pitch exploration in Chorales, rhythm and metre focus in Minimalism and Classical textures were popular with candidates this year.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> composed with convincing stylistic knowledge used musical elements for expressive communication with which to communicate their intentions composed appropriately for the occasion and audience, showing engagement with the overall commission composed inventive and consistent pieces which were strong in ideas and controlled in technique composed well-structured pieces which were cohesive in materials and had persuasively embedded transitions responded to the brief with aural familiarity, successfully communicating a sense of style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> composed with general stylistic knowledge limited use of musical elements for expressive communication. Musical intentions were not always clearly shown broadly responded to the occasion and/or audience - pieces did not fully engage with the intended audience composed formulaically, with inconsistent technique and handling of materials composed pieces with clear structure but lacking musical relationships and flowing transitions between sections composed pieces which showed basic aural familiarity and inconsistent stylistic elements

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • composed with a cohesive overview of their piece showing a flow of connected ideas • composed using strong melodic materials which gave the pieces a strong sense of identity • composed using stylistic and well directed harmonic progressions • wrote idiomatically for their chosen instrument or instrumental group • composed using original and creative ideas • created realisations which were vivid, using nuanced and stylistic articulations, embedded dynamic shape and contrast, appropriate tempo choices and performance directions • created realisations which showed a systematic and meticulous approach to the balance of recorded sounds, gradation of dynamics, nuanced changes in tempo and intended characterisation of the composition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • composed pieces which had only a general sense of overview and few embedded ideas • composed with melodies which were angular or had limited range and shape • composed pieces which used basic harmony, or harmony that was not always stylistically appropriate and was limited in directional flow • wrote with limited range and expressive knowledge for their chosen instruments • composed using borrowed ideas or ideas which lacked character • created realisations which were bland and lacked detailed and stylistic articulation and dynamics - realisations which lacked detail did not give the music the necessary character or musical direction to bring the music to life convincingly • created realisations which had not been given consideration in details of balance, tempo and gradation of dynamic sound.

Most common causes of centres not passing

Centres that submitted work which did not meet the required standard included work with only a very basic grasp of musical devices and stylistic convention.

Pieces were usually limited in melodic ideas and structural cohesion.

There was not always an engagement with the brief, with a sense of purpose and occasion not present.

Common misconceptions

It was very pleasing to see many very well formatted and focused briefs this year.

The candidate brief should ideally be in a similar format to those set by OCR for Section 1. The brief should be written before the piece is composed, be concise and include elements of style, instrumentation, length, performers, occasion and venue.

A few centres are still submitting overly long explanations and descriptions of the composition process in lieu of a brief. This limits access to the 5 marks available for the brief.

Some briefs are still being presented in the past tense. Briefs which are written in retrospect of the piece being written, limit access to the full range of marks.

If the brief is unfocused, this also limits access to the full range of marks available in the criterion, 'Response to the Brief'. If there are no clear musical intentions of style, genre or idiom, then examiners are not able to determine what the candidate was trying to achieve, thus limiting marks in this criterion.

Candidates should not use a very similar wording and idea to the OCR set briefs for Section 2 within the same submission, nor should they use past OCR set briefs verbatim.

However, candidates are not discouraged from playing to their strengths, and can if they wish, produce two pieces of work from the same area of study.

Realisations

The realisation is an important part of the submission, as this alone is used to examine the pieces. The submitted scores and/or descriptions are used purely as evidence for the realisation and as such are not given marks. However, it is important that the recorded realisation *and* the score or description, reflect the intentions of the candidate in as detailed way as possible. When using electronic submissions, candidates are encouraged to use software manipulation to achieve a realisation which has the subtleties of idiomatic expression, tempo and articulation that might be achieved in a live performance. There are many widely available products on the market to be able to do this and many of them are free. Many recordings are submitted with very basic detail and include only occasional dynamic markings and articulations. The scores sometimes included changes of tempo and dynamics, but candidates had not always attempted to realise these effectively in the recording.

Candidates who submit live recordings are encouraged to include in the score the detail discussed and realised in the recording process by the performers. Similarly, where jazz improvisations are used, they need to be written out or be described in the submission. Although it is accepted that this is not conventional jazz practice to have written out or described improvisations, in the case of the examination process, it is an important element in helping examiners mark the submissions in a transparent way.

Section 3

There were several examples this year of candidates presenting incorrect submissions. The main misunderstanding was in the choice of Area of Study. Candidates need to present three exercises from one Area of Study. Another misconception was in the focus area. Candidates should choose only one from Pitch Organisation, Rhythm and Metre, or Texture, and should write all three exercises with that one focus. The exercises should be a minimum of 45 seconds in length.

Avoiding potential malpractice

When borrowing material from other composers, please be reminded that it must not form the bulk of the piece and must only be used as a stimulus or basis, for development and structure of an original work.

Do not use OCR set briefs, word for word, from previous years.

Candidates need to direct performances of their own works when making live recordings. Submissions with improvisations and specific performer interpretations will not necessarily gain credit unless the details are within the back-up score.

Helpful resources

Available marks for communication are not always fully exploited. Simply exporting a Sibelius file as audio is usually often going to miss important detail. However, using a copy in Sibelius with added detail or exporting the MIDI to a sequencer to shape the music can enhance communication.

Use of [NotePerformer software](https://noteperformer.com) (noteperformer.com), paid for software, rather than basic Sibelius sound can also greatly enhance a recording.

Additional comments

Uploaded submissions contained a lot of errors and omissions this year. Examples include missing briefs, missing scores, missing CCS, recordings which stopped halfway through and uploads which were corrupted.

Please do not submit scores and briefs in anything other than PDF or Word document format. Sibelius files and Word documents are not acceptable.

Submitting material with the above errors interrupts the examining process and may lead to a delay in the release of results. Please check all submissions fully before uploading. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

Finally, thank you to the many centres who uploaded clearly labelled and comprehensively checked submissions. This really helps with the assessment process.

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