

GCSE (9–1)

Moderators' report

MUSIC

J536

For first teaching in 2016

J536/03/04 Summer 2024 series

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Introduction

Our moderators' 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.

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General overview

This report should be read in conjunction with the report for Component 01/02 Integrated Portfolio, as there is some crossover between the two units. In this report, there is some repetition of matters raised in the 2023 report. Although the composition brief detail and the stimuli alter from year to year, the actual requirements of the NEA remain constant.

The Practical Component contains two elements of NEA, the first of which is all about performing with others. The second element requires students to compose music to a specific brief based on a chosen area of study from the specification, along with a specific stimulus to incorporate into the musical fabric of the composition. As is always the case, most of the stimuli provided are musically specific in that they require the use and development of a specific rhythmic phrase, note pattern or chord sequence. Two of the remaining stimuli (the image and the short story) are designed to be used as the inspirational starting point for the composition with candidates having to create their piece around the mood suggested by their chosen stimulus. The development of the stimulus is crucial to the 'Relationship to the brief' mark, so due consideration should be given to this as the composition is refined and developed over time. Finally, the intention of the words stimulus is to provide a starting point for lyrics to a song. This links most obviously to an AOS5 composition, but for this session the words were permissible for AOS2 and AOS4 as well.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rehearsed ensemble performance pieces diligently, with a combined focus on accuracy and expression, resulting in a high standard of musical awareness of the contribution made by the candidate's part to the quality of the overall ensemble composed pieces that demonstrated a clear understanding and application of well taught compositional devices, such as the use of contrasting keys, melodic extension, variation, and development, and a harmonic awareness of phrasing and cadences gave due consideration to the conventions of their chosen area of study made sure that the chosen stimulus was used and developed as the focus of the musical content for significant sections of their composition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> performed pieces that were too difficult for them, resulting in frequent errors and hesitations that were disruptive to the musical quality of the ensemble composed pieces that were over dependent on the repetition of short chord patterns, simple riffs, and chord note based melodic ideas. This inevitably resulted in a lack of contrast and limited development of the compositional material paid little regard to the conventions of their chosen area of study made limited use of the chosen stimulus in the context of their overall composition.

Ensemble performance

This element of the component provides the opportunity for students in a GCSE Music class to experience and enjoy rehearsing together towards a common goal, while supporting each other in the preparation of their NEA. Many centres take full advantage of this, and student-based ensembles of all standards were frequently present in the work submitted. Rock bands were a common occurrence, along with a significant number of duets of two equal instruments (often a popular option for pianists). Work featuring high quality county string ensembles, jazz bands, acapella vocal quartets, and centre wind-bands were also noted by moderators for this session.

Ensembles can also include external performers, such as teachers, parents, friends, students in other year groups, etc.

Accuracy of Ensemble assessment

Ensemble performance has many similarities to the requirements of the solo performance unit and the assessment criteria therefore have a lot in common. One crucial difference to note is that the performance must include at least a minute of interaction between two or more performers, playing or singing an independent line. The repertoire chosen should therefore help the candidates to show genuine ensemble interaction to justify the highest marks of the ten to twelve band for 'Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble Awareness'.

As with Component 01/02, the assessment of performance was broadly accurate in a good majority of centres. Where leniency did occur, this was often against the 'Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble Awareness' criteria, where assessors had not fully considered the quality of the candidate's contribution to the ensemble. A mark in the ten to twelve mark band requires both excellent attention to the musical detail of the candidate's part alongside a high level of ensemble awareness in regard to the balance and cohesion of the ensemble as a whole.

Provided here are some extra band descriptors for added context to the marking criteria of this aspect of the assessment.

Marks	Descriptor – Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble awareness (Component 03/04)
10 - 12	Musical and stylish; high level of ensemble awareness evident
7 - 9	Some musical detail; co-ordinates / fits well with other performer(s)
4 - 6	Limited attention to musical detail; awareness of other performer(s), but significant problems with balance and interaction
1 - 3	Little attempt at musical detail – frequently out of time with other performer(s)

The OCR definition of an ensemble

An ensemble is defined by OCR as a piece performed by two or more live musicians. Ideally an ensemble for two players should be a duet of two equal instruments or voices. This provides the two players with the opportunity to show a high level of ensemble awareness through the interaction of the two parts.

This definition enables a lead instrument or voice accompanied by a piano to also be accepted. By some definitions this might be classed as a solo and accompaniment; therefore, when awarding the mark for 'Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble Awareness', assessors should take account of the extent to which the soloist is genuinely interacting with the accompaniment, or indeed take note as to whether the accompanist is leading the soloist in dynamic and tempo adjustments. This is especially important if the accompaniment part is not played by another candidate.

Many centres are aware of this, and it was good to hear, for example, vocalists being joined by a harmony singer as well as the piano accompaniment to create a higher degree of ensemble interaction for the candidate(s).

There were some examples of ensembles such as a drum kit part being improvised along to a piano solo. While still technically an ensemble, this is a somewhat unsatisfactory approach to ensemble playing.

A candidate's part in an ensemble should not be consistently doubled by another player. This can easily happen if the ensemble takes the form of a whole class performance but can also happen when a piano accompaniment doubles the vocal melody line within the written part.

Misconception



Please note that two live singers singing alternate sections of a song to a backing track is not an ensemble. The minute of ensemble interaction refers to the actual time the two live singers are performing an independent line simultaneously.

In this situation, the two singers could work on singing harmony lines for sections of the song to make sure that they sing simultaneously, while maintaining an independent part.

Centres are once again reminded of the need for care when recording an ensemble. The recording needs to make sure that the candidate's part can be clearly heard throughout, but always within the context of an overall well balanced musical ensemble. It is recommended that trial recordings are taken, to make sure that the detail of the assessed part(s) can be properly appreciated in the playback. It is very easy for a drum kit to drown out the other musicians, for example.

Identifying the part played by the candidate within the ensemble

Despite this being flagged up as an issue in the 2023 report, there were still countless examples in this session of centres not identifying the part being played or sung by the candidate on the recording. Centres should state which part the candidate is performing, either on the Candidate Assessment Form, or on the score itself. Although a centre may easily be able to identify the difference between two vocalists from the sound of their voice, it is not so easy for a moderator who does not know the candidates. Likewise, a moderator can't just assume that the candidate is likely to be playing Part 1 in a piano duet either.

It may sometimes be helpful to provide video recordings of an ensemble of multiple instrumentalists playing similar sounding instruments (for example in a steel band or keyboard ensemble) so that the candidate part can be properly identified, and the playing technique observed.

Technology based performances were also a frequent option for this component, usually in the form of sequencing in which the candidate must show a high degree of ensemble skills through the creation and balancing of multiple parts into a final mix. As with Component 01/02, an element of live input is required during the final recording, and this information should be provided to the moderator.

Some DJ ensembles were also viewed by moderators, featuring two performers working across two or more DJ machines. Some of this performance work was high energy and very impressive indeed.

Set brief composition

Writing to the brief is an important part of this unit. The core criteria mark bands are the same as those used for the Component 01/02 compositions, but the marking bands are narrower to allow for an extra six marks to be allocated to the successful application of the brief and chosen stimulus. Compositions should initially be marked against the core criteria to assess the quality of the musical understanding evident within the work. The 'Relationship to the brief' mark is then considered separately, regarding how successfully the candidate has met the requirements of the genre of the area of study, and the degree to which the stimulus has been incorporated into the composition. These six marks can make a substantial difference to the mark a composition receives.

The rubric of the Composition Briefs booklet is important. Candidates should be made aware of the expectations for each brief before making their choice. The use of the stimulus within the context of the brief is essential for composing within this component. Careful note should be taken of the stimuli that can be linked to each of the briefs, as these change from session to session. In this session, some candidates chose a stimulus that wasn't available for use with their chosen area of study. Some candidates even stated in their write ups that '*I did not use a stimulus*'.

As with Component 01/02, where there was leniency in centre assessment, this was more often related to the marking of compositions than to ensemble performing.

Assessment for learning: use of the stimulus



- The chosen stimulus should be extended and developed to access the higher marks. Repetition of the same rhythmic phrase, note pattern or even the chord sequence for the entire piece is likely to be a restricting factor on the assessment outcome.
- Using the stimulus just once, and then moving straight on to something different will particularly affect the RTB mark. The stimulus should therefore be clearly used as the starting point for a **significant section** of the composition – it helps to indicate where the stimulus has been used in the composition if it is not immediately obvious.
- The rhythmic phrase can be used rhythmically as a percussion part, or as the rhythm of a melodic phrase. Use of the rhythm as an ostinato for long sections of the piece, or as an afterthought in a drum kit part is likely to restrict the assessment outcome. The musical ideas need to develop, and then return.
- The chord sequence should be used accurately, and in the right order as the starting point: there are only four of them. In this session, the seventh in the A7 chord was often missed.
- Both the note patterns and the rhythmic phrase should be used in the correct order as the starting point. They can of course be developed as the piece progresses.
- The image can be open to the widest of interpretations. Candidates are advised to provide a supporting written statement explaining how their music has interpreted the specific features of the image provided.
- For the short story, candidates should create the musical atmosphere based on the given text, and then develop the story and music as they see fit. There will usually be at least two 'events' provided in the given short story, for which the candidate will be required to suggest a definite change of musical mood, before moving onto their own extension. As stated earlier in the report, a description of the extended story should be provided with the score.
- The set of words can be split into single lines, two couplets or used in one chunk. They are best used as the start of a verse, or in the chorus. Their use in the Bridge section only is a bit tenuous. Extra lyrics should continue the character or theme of the given lyrics to justify a higher RTB mark.
- The character of the set of words are not intended to be used as an 'inspiration' for an instrumental piece, or for a song with completely different lyrics.

Area of Study 2 proved a popular option with candidates for this session. The requirements of the brief allowed candidates to choose any of the eight stimuli as the starting point for their composition. So, both the note patterns, both the rhythmic phrases, and the chords were commonly used. Somewhat surprisingly, the image stimulus and the words stimulus were also both used in a small number of occasions. While the image stimulus could be made to work, the words really weren't an appropriate choice for this area of study.

The principle of Area of Study 2 (writing a melody with a suitable accompaniment) was successfully understood by most candidates. However, there were isolated examples of pieces written for just a solo piano, and a solo instrument accompanied by a drumbeat, which are again, not appropriate for this area of study.

Some candidates wrote ensemble compositions; within these it wasn't very clear as to which instruments constituted the solo parts, and which instruments were the accompaniment parts, and this also impacted on the 'Relationship to the brief' criteria mark.

Area of Study 3 once again proved to be the least popular option for this session, despite the range of stimuli available. In terms of genre, Calypso compositions were most frequently seen, along with Samba, Indian Classical, and Salsa (despite Salsa not being a part of the specification).

Assessing rhythm only pieces

Candidates who submit AOS3 rhythm compositions (for example, African Drumming or Samba) that only feature untuned percussion parts are unable to demonstrate understanding of the higher order skills of melody and harmony in their work. This style of composition is therefore unlikely to show sufficient compositional understanding to access the upper two core criteria marks.

Candidate working within these genres should be taught to include melody and harmony in their compositions.

Area of Study 4, using the avalanche image, was by far the most popular choice with candidates. Most candidates heeded the extra instructions relating to the provision of a description of how the image was depicted in their work. This was most effectively provided as annotations on the score which could be read and followed as the descriptive musical ideas developed, or as a separate written statement of their intent.

The image was interpreted in many ways. There were some stunning dramatic compositions for full orchestra, as well as for smaller instrumental ensembles, all of which went some way to providing some vivid aural descriptions of the peaceful snowy landscape that was interrupted by the dramatic avalanche.

There was the occasional use of a piano solo piece to describe the avalanche or to create the short story. When done well, with the intention of describing the distinct phases of the chosen storyline, this approach was successful. In other cases, it was just a way of writing a piano solo with a vague and tenuous justification to the stimulus.

Area of Study 4 is for descriptive music

Some compositions leaned towards using popular music style as the vehicle for a descriptive composition based on the image, including techno and house. Despite the best attempts of candidates to justify this approach in their written statement, moderators felt that this style of work was rarely successful in terms of an Area of Study 4 submission.

Similarly, some candidates used the short story as an excuse to introduce a composition in a style of their choosing, (e.g. *'Above the tower, the city lit up with the sound of jazz....'*). What followed was a jazz composition, rather than a descriptive composition.

It must therefore be reiterated that the intention of an AOS4 composition is for the candidate to write music appropriate to an image or storyline. Although popular style music (for example) is sometimes used as background music in films, popular music is the focus of AOS5, so the composition style of AOS4 needs to be distinct. Similarly, referring to the case above, a jazz composition could have been created for Area of Study 2.

Assessment for learning



Film music can be episodic by its nature, as it flits from scene to scene describing the progression of the story. This can result in a composition that lacks overall cohesion, as it ends up sounding like several short unrelated ideas. Moderators tended to refer to these as sound fx compositions.

To access the highest mark bands, more able candidates should be taught to write extended melodic lines, repetitions of which develop melodically, harmonically, and timbrally to reflect the changing moods of the story. This can be linked to the concept of the leitmotif which is a key concept within film scores.

Area of Study 5 was once again a popular choice with candidates and many excellent songs were heard using either the words stimulus or the chords stimulus. The use of the Note Pattern stimulus was also available for this area of study, and a small number of candidates chose to use this. However, where the rhythmic phrase occurred as, for example, an ostinato on the hi-hat for part of the piece, this was not considered suitable justification for a high 'Relationship to the brief' mark.

Most candidates followed the requirement in the rubric to provide words with their song; there were far fewer submissions of pop instrumentals than in previous years, which was the intention of the clearer wording of the rubric.

The words did not have to be sung onto the composition recording. A guide melody on a clear timbre could be used instead. In many cases this worked well, and moderators were able to follow the word setting with ease. In a minority of cases, the words seemed to have been written as an afterthought, and there was no evident relationship between the music and the setting of the words.

Assessment for learning



Word setting is an integral part of the AOS5 Area of Study, and candidates need to be clear about how their lyrics scan against their melody.

If the lyrics are not being performed live, consider adding the lyrics to a printed copy of the notated melody line, in the form of a lead sheet. Alternatively, the melody could be written as note letter names, again with the lyrics written underneath. This can then form part of the score evidence that is submitted to the moderator.

Common misconceptions

Please see Component 01/02 Report.

Avoiding potential malpractice

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