

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

MUSIC

OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in Music

H543

For first teaching in 2016

H543/03/04 Summer 2025 series

Contents

Introduction3

General overview4

 Most common causes of centres not passing.....5

 Common misconceptions5

 Section 3.....6

 Avoiding potential malpractice.....7

 Helpful resources7

 Additional comments.....7

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 2025 was 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.

As in 2024, Set Brief 5 proved to be very popular with candidates. The requirement to write a programmatic piece which conveyed a year in the life of an Osprey gave candidates ample opportunity 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 a lively piece of chamber music. The other set briefs showed imaginative responses too, with Set Brief 6 showing a range of different approaches in response to the music of Berio. The Area of Study 3, instrumental jazz brief examples often showed extensive knowledge of the *Cool Jazz* era as did Area of Study 2 with the songs and *Swing* style of Glen Miller. 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 and Jazz Modes, Classical textures, and rhythm and metre across all the Areas of Study were popular with candidates this year.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
- 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	- 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 - 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

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
- 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.	- 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.

Supporting candidates in writing a creative brief

It is important to use a good brief as it provides candidates with focus and purpose.

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 place 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 unfocussed, 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, so limiting marks in this criterion.

Candidates should avoid using 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 audio 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 only basic detail, occasional dynamic markings and general articulations. The most successful pieces of work had idiomatic articulation, integrated dynamic shape and contrast, specific performance directions and audio recordings which matched the detail. Less effective scores had some detail of tempo and dynamics, but candidates had not always attempted to realise these effectively in the recording or they had been added to the score after making the recording and were therefore not evident in the audio.

Candidates who submit live recordings are encouraged to include in the score the detail discussed as part of the rehearsal and recording process with 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 it 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. Improvisations do not necessarily demonstrate the work of the candidate unless verified in some way within the composer evidence.

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.

Improvisation Validity

Improvisations need to be verified by the candidate as their own work. This is not a performance component and therefore examples of improvisatory material need to show some form of evidence that the work belongs to the candidate. This can be written verification that the candidate is playing the improvisation, a description of the improvisation or a written out version of the improvisation if played by someone other than the candidate. Further evidence may otherwise be requested.

Avoiding potential malpractice

When borrowing material from other composers, please remember that it must not form the bulk of the piece and must only be used as a stimulus or basis, for the 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 marks unless the details are within the back-up score.

Downloading the correct briefs

Please check that the downloaded briefs for the board set brief are for the correct year and unit. Failure to do so may lead to malpractice issues.

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 (noteperformer.com), paid for software, rather than basic Sibelius sound can also greatly enhance a recording.

Refinement of non-live Audio Recordings

Audio recordings with nuanced detail and evidence of post-production care will give a clearer and more vivid representation of the candidate's work.

Additional comments

Several uploaded submissions contained errors and omissions, although this was less than in previous years. Centres should be congratulated on taking the time to check items carefully before submitting – it certainly eased the examining process this year. Having said that, there were still several 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.

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