

Moderators' report

GCSE

MUSIC

OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in Music

J536

For first teaching in 2016

J536/03/04 Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our Moderators' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on centres' assessment of moderated work, based on what has been observed by the moderation team. These reports include a general commentary of accuracy of internal assessment judgements, identify good practice in relation to evidence collation and presentation, and comment on the quality of centre assessment decisions against individual Learning Objectives. The report also highlights areas where requirements have been misinterpreted and provides guidance to centre assessors on requirements for accessing higher mark bands. Where appropriate, the report will also signpost other sources of information that centre assessors will find helpful.

OCR completes moderation of centre-assessed work in order to quality assure the internal assessment judgements made by assessors within a centre. Where OCR cannot confirm the centre's marks, we may adjust them in order to align them to the national standard. Any adjustments to centre marks are detailed on the Moderation Adjustments report, which can be downloaded from Interchange when results are issued. Centres should also refer to their individual centre report provided after moderation has been completed. In combination, these centre-specific documents and this overall report should help to support centres' internal assessment and moderation practice for future series.

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General overview

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

The Practical Component is now fully re-established following the gap of a couple of years caused by the COVID-19 pandemic regulations. Many centres are confident in the delivery of this unit, and this is reflected in the range and quality of work submitted for moderation.

The Practical Component contains two elements of NEA, the first of which is all about performing with others. The second element requires candidates 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 within the AOS5 brief.

As with Unit 01/02, where there was leniency in centre assessment, this was more often related to the marking of compositions than to ensemble performing. However, it was once again pleasing to note that most centres assessed this unit accurately.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
- 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. - ensured that the chosen stimulus was used and developed as the focus of the musical content for significant sections of their composition.	- 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 unit provides the opportunity for the candidates 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).

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 10 – 12 band for 'Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble Awareness'.

As with Unit 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 10 – 12 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 additional band descriptors for added context to the marking criteria of this aspect of the assessment.

Marks	Descriptor – Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble awareness (Unit 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.

However, 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 solo piano piece. 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.

For this session, moderators heard multiple renditions of 'For Good' from the musical 'Wicked'. This is a song sung by the characters Elphaba and Glinda. Most of the song is sung by one or other of the characters as a solo. There are moments of unison singing, and even fewer moments of harmony singing. When performed with a live piano accompaniment, the song can be accepted as a satisfactory ensemble. When sung with a backing track (as many were), the element of ensemble work is unsatisfactory. This results in a considerable adjustment to the mark for 'Expression, Interpretation and Ensemble Awareness' as the ensemble element is lacking.

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. For example, it is very easy for a drum kit to drown out the other musicians, or for the Bass Guitar to get lost in the mix.

Identifying the part played by the candidate within the ensemble

Despite this being flagged up as an issue in previous reports, there were still countless examples in this series of centres not identifying the part being played or sung by the candidate on the recording. This resulted in many time-consuming contacts with centres for clarification. 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, especially if the music uploaded contains both the parts.

Although not mandatory, it is helpful to provide video recordings of an ensemble of multiple instrumentalists playing similar sounding instruments (for example in a percussion band or keyboard ensemble) so that the candidate part can be properly identified, and the playing technique observed. Moderators commented that some centres provided video ensemble evidence for this session, and it was extremely useful.

Technology based performances were also a frequent option for this unit, 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 Unit 01/02, an element of live input is required during the final recording, and this information should be provided to the moderator. Once again video evidence is very useful in this situation.

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, while others featured a dominant DJ controlling much of the performance.

A few centres went to great lengths to create a technology based performance ensemble, where candidates had collaborated on different elements of the same sequence, and then controlled their own inputs to the final performance live. This involved mixing inputs from several different sources. The thought behind the process was impressive and creative.

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 Unit 01/02 compositions, but the marking bands are narrower to allow for an extra 6 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 6 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 unit. Careful note should be taken of the stimuli that can be linked to each of the briefs, as these change from session to session. As in previous sessions, some candidates chose a stimulus that wasn't available for use with their chosen Area of Study. The requirements of the briefs change every year, so the permissible stimuli for each Area of Study brief should be carefully considered before candidates begin work on their composition.

Assessment for learning



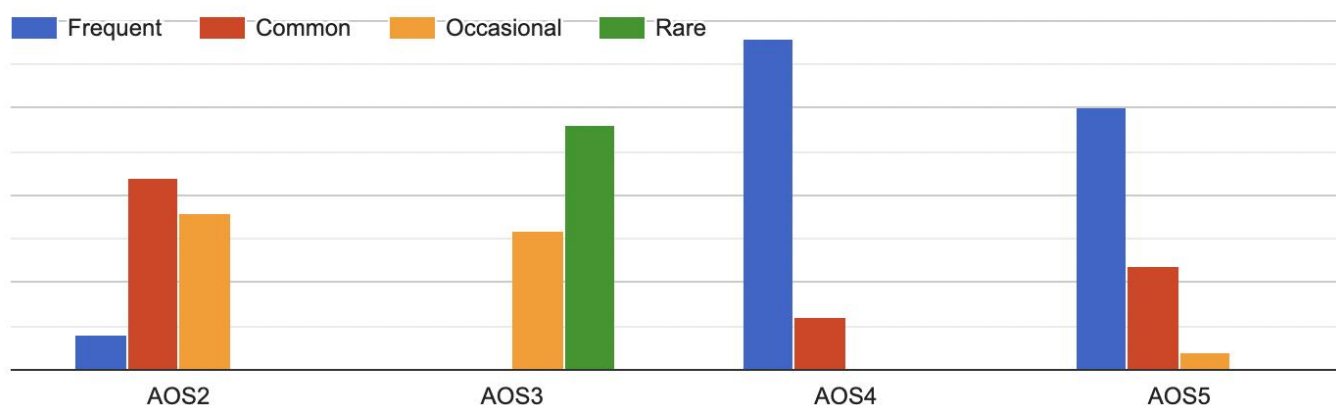
Repetition and lack of development continue to be the overwhelming issue that prevents a composition from accessing the top two mark bands. For example, moderators reported on many examples of AOS2 compositions where an ABA structure was used, but the returning repeat of the second A section was just a direct repeat (copy and paste).

Candidates should be taught to add variation to the repeat of the Second A section, e.g. passing notes, rhythmic changes, textural changes, timbral changes, dynamic changes, counter melodies, etc.

Moderators also noted that sudden stops were common within a small but significant amount of composition work, (sometimes even mid bar), with little thought about how a piece should finish.

Composition was best when candidates wrote in a style which they were familiar. This resulted in some superb AOS5 rock pieces - some realised on a DAW and some by a live band, as well as pop songs with successful backing vocals to thicken the texture and add development to repeated sections.

Within this session, AOS4 and AOS5 compositions were overwhelmingly the most popular choice, while AOS3 compositions were uncommon. This graphic represents the moderating teams experience of the uptake for each Area of Study.



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.
- 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 must 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. A description of the extended story must 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. Additional 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 was a less popular option with candidates for this session than in previous years. The requirements of the brief restricted candidates to either of the note pattern stimuli as the starting point for their composition, with the major and the minor options being chosen evenly.

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, or an ensemble such as a string quartet, where there was no defined soloist. This impacted on the 'Relationship to the Brief' criteria mark.

There were some excellent Baroque and Classical pastiche compositions enjoyed by moderators. Several candidates chose to write compositions beyond the traditional classical style associated with 'The Concerto through Time', but provided that there was a defined soloist and accompaniment, the chosen genre was not a limiting factor in the assessment of the 'Relationship to the Brief'.

The context of the performance of the composition at an evening concert in a library was easily achieved by all the candidates.

As seen in the earlier graphic, Area of Study 3 once again proved to be the least popular option for this session. In terms of genre, Samba compositions were most frequently seen, along with Calypso, Bhangra and some Middle Eastern work.

Most candidates working in this area chose to use the 4/4 rhythmic phrase. Rarely was the 5/8 rhythmic phrase utilised, and the chords stimulus was also quite uncommon.

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 2 core criteria marks.

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

The context of the performance of the composition at a youth cultural event was easily achieved by all the candidates.

Area of Study 4, using the image of the aeroplane was by far the most popular choice with candidates. The image was interpreted in many ways, but the most common approach taken by candidates involved, the new plane being unveiled in the hangar, before taking off on a maiden flight with excited passengers on board. Some encountered turbulence which added the opportunity for drama into the music, before the flight successfully returned to ground. Sadly, some flights ended in disaster as the plane crashed, killing everyone on board!

The short story was often used as a stimulus too, with the 'sound heard in the distance' frequently turning out to be the arrival of an impressive aircraft.

Both these approaches enabled candidates to justify the performance context of the composition at the unveiling of a new aeroplane.

The choice of stimuli for this session allowed for the use of either of the note patterns, either of the rhythmic phrases, or the chords. There were examples of all these stimuli being applied successfully.

Some candidates took a slightly more abstract approach to the image, with the music focussing on a description of the mood of a passenger, or the destination of the plane. In some cases, this was just a way of writing an instrumental piece justified by a tenuous connection to the image.

AOS4 - Candidates MUST provide additional information to describe their application of the chosen stimulus within the brief

Most candidates (but by no means all) heeded the additional 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.

However, there were frequent examples where this was not the case, with the only clue to the candidate intention being a title to the composition such as 'The Aeroplane' or 'The Flight'. Centres are reminded that detailed supporting information, as outlined in the brief itself, is essential to the justification of the 'Relationship to the Brief' mark.

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.

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.

Submissions for AOS4 should reflect an understanding of musical storytelling and atmospheric writing, rather than defaulting to commercial or pop-based forms. For example, descriptive pieces could have tempo and metre changes as well as dynamic changes and dramatic pauses and should look to exploit of a palette of instrumental sounds that suggest different moods; all of this will help to bring a musical story to life.

A popular style piece, with the same tempo for the entire composition, is unlikely to be considered as descriptive music.

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 successful 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. Most candidates followed the requirement in the rubric to provide words with their song. A small number of candidates still submitted an instrumental pop song. This meant that these pieces were unable to attain the highest marks for the 'Relationship to the Set Brief'.

It was sometimes difficult to determine the candidate's full intention for their song when the vocal line was not sung on the audio. Where candidates have added a clear melody line with words under the score, the candidate intention is clear to the moderator. However, when screenshots have been produced and the lyrics are presented next to this, the intention is often not at all clear. Moderators will always try to link the melody line of the recording to the set lyrics, but without clear indications as to where the melismas are, this can prove difficult. Therefore, where candidates would like to use a screenshot as evidence, rather than a notated score, it is helpful to the moderation process if the lyrics are sung.

That said, 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 few 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.

The context of the performance of the composition at the 50th anniversary celebrations for a local village hall inspired some creative lyrics about the history and the characters of the hall in times gone by. In actuality, there was no need to directly link the content of the lyrics directly to the village hall – a song with lyrics inspired by the theme of the set lyrics, (making the correct life choices), was more than acceptable for the performance context.

For common misconceptions, potential areas of malpractice, helpful resources and any additional commentary, please see the report for GCSE Music Unit 01/02.

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