



A-Level **Music** 7272/C

Report on the examination

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General Comments

Once again, this year the variety, creativity and imagination of students was on full show with a diverse and richly engaging broadness to submissions. As per the specification, students had to submit two compositions totalling a minimum of 4 minutes 30 seconds and very few students did not meet this requirement. There was an increase in the use and declaration of AI in compositions, and it is important for teachers to note, and to adhere to, the JCQ guidance on the use of AI.

Teachers are to be commended for their approach to this unit, which largely showed a willingness to work with each student's particular penchant for genre; this was particularly seen in centres with students attempting different briefs. In almost all cases it was clear to examiners that this was of benefit to students.

Scores, Lead Sheets and Aural Guides

Students are required to submit a written account of their intentions, which can take any of the forms in the heading, or more than one, which some students took advantage of in this series. The quality of this submission is covered by the mark scheme and therefore due care and attention should be taken to ensure that the quality of the written submission accurately reflects the aural experience. At the bottom end, a chaotic score or an aural guide which gives scant musical detail will, to quote the mark scheme, "in no way enhance the composition..." and will therefore impact the mark awarded.

Some genres lend themselves more readily to different types of written account: it is unlikely that an aural guide will do justice to a chorale just as a notated score is almost certainly not appropriate for a piece of EDM. Students are once again advised, therefore, to pick the best option for their written submission. It should not be assumed (because it is not the case) that examiners would prefer to see notated scores.

Notated Scores

There were some incredibly detailed and well-presented notated scores this series with some students going as far as to furnish their compositions with some appropriate cover art. However, other work fell short in a number of areas with many of the issues arising through the inappropriate use of software:

- The use of rhythms that, while possible on a computer, do not really exist 'in real life' e.g. triplets starting halfway through a beat
- Incorrect use of time signatures and key signatures
- Use of letter name notes (with clefs) for drum notation
- Inadequate word setting (where one word with multiple syllables spans multiple notes, a hyphen should be used to show the split of syllables)
- Vocal parts with no text

- Use of multiple ledger lines where a change of clef would be more appropriate
- Use of very short note durations where a longer note with a staccato note would be much easier to read
- Omission (or inconsistent, or inappropriate use) of dynamics, phrasing, articulations, bowings etc.

On this final point it is important for students to recognise the importance of these elements within composition; they are not an afterthought but rather an integral way in which a composer conveys their intention and should be considered in the very earliest stages of the compositional process.

Some students annotate their score which clutters the page and is generally not helpful to the examiner. This is the case both for Brief and Free compositions (e.g. Roman numerals in Brief 1 scores). A notable exception to this is in music for media where short annotations outlining the programme are appropriate.

Though much less common than at the outset of this specification, ‘improvised’ solos should, where possible, be notated. At the very least the CRF and/or programme note should make clear who is performing the improvisation.

Exporting and submitting separate parts for every instrument in an ensemble is supremely unhelpful to an examiner, as is a score that employs either very large or very small stave sizes. The former results in an examiner turning pages rather than looking at music, and the latter requires a magnifying glass! Each part should be clearly labelled on the score with an instrument name (at least on the first page) and scores omitting this vital detail are likely to be penalised on that section of the mark scheme.

Finally, it is vital that ALL parts that are heard are shown on the score.

Lead Sheets

The specification allows for students to submit a lead sheet. However, a lead sheet does not contain details of many of the compositional decisions taken, texture, instrumentation, accompaniment rhythms etc. It is therefore very beneficial to a submission to accompany a Lead Sheet with an Aural Guide (see below).

Aural Guides

Each year guidance is given on how best to present an aural guide and some centres are clearly paying close attention, yet some common issues persist; it is often the case that huge effort has gone into creating an aural guide with incredibly detailed descriptions of electronic manipulation of sound sources, yet simple details such as chord progressions, melodic shapes and drum rhythms have been completely omitted.

The strongest aural guides use time stamps rather than bar numbers. The latter are at best difficult to follow (particularly where time signature and tempo have not been given, as is

sometimes the case) and at worst meaningless (for example where no 'arrange window' or similar is given to show the overarching structure of the piece).

The following advice will help students create the most helpful aural guide:

- A screenshot of the arrange window is useful. It should clearly show the overarching features of the piece: instrumentation, whether each track is audio or MIDI, tempo and metre. If necessary, it is fine for this to span more than one page
- Notated fragments should always clearly state the instrument, clef, bar number/time stamp, and should not be confused by quantisation, key switch data, and so on
- Piano roll notation is a recognised form of notation for music examples, as long as the piano roll can actually be seen in the example
- Discussion of effects and audio processing information is useful for styles where these are fundamental composition and stylistic choices. But however, detailed the coverage of these elements is, students must not neglect other musical features of their composition
- The inclusion of all lyrics with chord symbols (accurately placed) is always helpful

Recordings

The quality of recordings was generally strong this series with a pleasing number of live recordings, at least in part; many submissions were a hybrid of live vocal/guitar parts supplementing computer-generated lines. With excellent free software now so ubiquitous, presenting student work in this format is possible for almost all students and is to be encouraged. Indeed, the compositional process is greatly enhanced by parts being played live as valuable lessons are learnt through the experience.

Likewise, with free sample libraries available, the use of very outdated and inadequate MIDI sounds can largely be avoided. Creating a recording using more realistic sound libraries in general presents the composer's intentions better.

This series saw an increase in the use of AI to perform vocal music. In most instances this was declared as per the JCQ guidelines. In some cases, the quality of the resultant recording was excellent, though in a number of others the type of voice, the language of the text and the tuning created a rather ungainly product that made assessment harder than if a simple MIDI recording had been submitted. If a student is going to make use of AI tools such as these, the score that is inputted must be accurate with word-setting, particularly, carefully done to ensure a strong result.

Students and centres are reminded to always listen back to recordings before uploading to the DMP to ensure their accuracy; in multiple cases this series, parts were missing in the submitted recording (probably due to the highlighting of staves or tracks left on mute on the chosen software when the export of audio happened).

Lastly, where a live recording is submitted, it is vital that centres time these. If the computer-generated recording only just reaches 4.30 and a live rendition is played faster, then the minimum time will not be met, and a penalty will be imposed. To avoid this, both a computer-

generated recording *and* a live recording can be submitted, and examiners appreciate having both where appropriate.

Programme Notes

Programme notes are always interesting to read and when used appropriately can greatly enhance the examiner's understanding of submissions, highlighting anything that is not obvious from the recording or supporting documentation. Students and centres are reminded, however, of the **specification requirement of 150 words per composition**; longer (and *much* longer) notes will not gain extra credit and rarely enhance the examiner's understanding of the music (this is perhaps most particularly the case in brief 1).

Especially in briefs requiring the use of musical features such as irregular time signatures (brief 2) or use of a mode (brief 5), the programme note is an ideal place to highlight the location of these features. Examiners appreciate these signposts, and it is to the student's advantage to direct the examiner to where the brief has been met.

Composition to a Brief

As ever, the first composition had to respond to one of seven briefs, each broadly corresponding to one of the Areas of Study in the specification. Conforming to the pattern set in recent series, Brief 1, the chorales option, was by far the most popular. Other briefs were all attempted in varying degrees of popularity in the following order (most to least popular): Brief 3, Brief 4, Brief 2, Brief 5, Brief 7 and Brief 6.

Briefs this year encompassed genres not previously seen in this unit, namely Prog Rock (Brief 2), Modal Jazz (Brief 5) and Neoclassicism (Brief 7). For the first time, actual film clips were included in Brief 3; these were not meant to be downloaded, nor could they be included in student submissions.

Where actual musical content was given in the brief (Briefs 1, 2, 4 and 6) this material was not allowed to be changed and any deviation from the given material was considered an infringement. For Briefs 2, 4 and 6 it was helpful to examiners where students signposted the use of the musical material either within the score/aural guide or within the programme note. Likewise, it was beneficial to have other elements from the brief (e.g. the 'harmonic surprise' in Brief 7) pointed out.

Many of these other elements are compulsory and their omission will also be considered an infringement. It cannot be stated strongly enough that **AQA provides centres with details of an allocated NEA Adviser** who will always be able to give specific details of how any wording will be interpreted by examiners. If in doubt, contact your adviser (or AQA if you cannot find the details of your adviser).

The best compositions to a brief not only made fundamental use of the required elements, weaving them into the fabric of the piece, but made integral to their work the intended

audience. For example, Brief 6 asked for the piece to ‘project a spirit of reflection and thoughtfulness’.

Brief 1

This brief is split into two exercises (Chorale 1 and Chorale 2). Chorale 1 provides soprano and bass lines, whereas Chorale 2 offers a given melody only. Both exercises need to be completed as four-part harmonisations for soprano, alto, tenor and bass. Indeed, the brief states that students should add parts for ‘alto and tenor’ (Chorale 1) and ‘alto, tenor and bass’ (Chorale 2). Some students, however, not only presented a recording for piano (or organ, or strings etc.) but also indicated on the score that the piece was written specifically for that instrument. Technically this is an infringement of the brief.

Fundamental to the most successful student work is the notion that chorales are pieces of music and not simply an academic exercise. Pacing, tonal journey, placing of suspensions and modulations should therefore be taken into account.

Students should note that harmonisation of a chorale means that every note of the melody is harmonised in order to satisfy the brief. Of course, this is not the same as every note requiring a new chord. Harmonic rhythm is still an important compositional decision that should be taken by the student, and context will dictate whether quavers in the melody are treated as melodic decoration or as new harmony notes. There were some interesting decisions to be made on this front in chorale 2 (see below).

As has consistently been the case, there were some occasions where the given material was altered or miscopied in some way by students. Examples included changes to the pitch of given material, rhythmic changes, omission of fermatas addition/omission of accidentals and inclusion of additional beats or rests. These inevitably led to some unforced problems and it should be reiterated that the given soprano/bass lines should not be altered. It is also worth students checking the given parts back against the question paper before attempting to complete the exercises (and regularly throughout the compositional process). Additionally, there were instances of the alto being heard above the soprano. This should be avoided.

While students may choose whether to submit their chorales in open or closed score, closed score submissions (two staves, with Soprano and Alto on the treble staff and Tenor and Bass on the bass staff) tended to show greater control and technical fluency. Writing in open score presents a greater challenge and, again, hardly any of the small handful of submissions of this type profited from the choice. It is helpful for examiners to be presented work in which each chorale is contained on one side of A4 rather than spanning two.

The following general advice is very similar to that given in previous reports, all of which still stands:

The majority of chorale submissions demonstrated a degree of knowledge of appropriate technique and style. As has been stated in previous reports, examiners look for evidence of:

- The ability to modulate

- In exercise 2, good choices of keys in the wider tonal context of the chorale
- Strong cadences, with stylistic details such as suspensions or passing sevenths
- Idiomatic (i.e. singable) writing for the individual voice parts, as well as good spacing amongst them in the formation of chords
- Quaver enrichment, usually through suspensions and passing notes (auxiliary notes tend to be less idiomatic than these, but can be made to be effective)
- In exercise 2, a strong and purposeful bass line, using a combination of conjunct and disjunct movement and driving progressions forward with interest.

Technical errors commonly found in solutions included the following:

- Consecutive 5ths and octaves (including those that occurred by contrary motion, which seemed to be particularly common this series), as well as consecutive unisons
 - Students should remember that quaver movement in one part can introduce consecutives where none existed previously
- Unprepared dissonances (4ths, 7ths and 9ths)
- Dissonances (4ths, 7ths and 9ths) that do not resolve downwards appropriately
- Doubled dissonances which can therefore not both resolve appropriately lest consecutives are created
- Awkward melodic intervals, such as augmented 4ths, 5ths and 2nds or, in some contexts, diminished 4ths and 5ths (these can both be acceptable if the note following the diminished interval moves back on itself by a semitone, e.g. C down to F# and up to G – especially in a bass line). Unidiomatic diatonic 7ths (major and minor) were also found
- Wide spaces (greater than an octave) between Soprano and Alto or Alto and Tenor, leading to poorly spaced chords
- Inappropriate doubling of the major 3rd in chords (this can be acceptable in some cases, such as parts arriving on the third via contrary motion, or in a IVb-V7b-I/i progression, where IVb might have a doubled major 3rd to avoid other part-writing problems)
- Unsuitable use of second inversion chords
- Use of diminished triads in root position
- Use of a passing note other than through the dominant 7th in a perfect cadence
- Overlapping of voices (both within a chord – alto below tenor, for example – and where a voice leaps above or below an adjacent voice on the next beat, such as an alto moving to a note that is below the soprano but above the soprano's PREVIOUS note)
- Bass notes unmoving from one beat to the next (especially before and after a barline) – though the intensification of that unmoving bassline by, for example, a suspension or a V7d chord is acceptable and stylistic.

Whilst the “passing 6/4” is a perfectly acceptable progression, a passing 6/3 (linking chords I and Ib with vii^ob) is arguably more stylish and often allows for a 7-6 suspension to be deployed.

It should also be reiterated that chorales have as their basis sung hymn tunes. Although not stated, the melody has an implied text and therefore the number of syllables in the soprano should be matched by those found in the lower parts. A lack of consideration for this resulted

in needless repeated notes and over-long notes. (N.B. This year there were interesting exceptions to this in Chorale 1. See below).

Tempo is an important compositional decision in chorales, as it can demonstrate that students have thought about the appropriate speed for their solutions. Many students did this well, for example an intricate solution at a slow tempo. However, there are still some submissions that simply use the default tempo of the chosen software, which can lead to a very breathless or “garbled” realisation in the recording. Conversely, there were some incredibly slow tempo realisations that were not merited by the detail in the solutions. It is wise to be pragmatic here. If chorales are chosen, a longer free composition is likely necessary to make up the required time length for the total submission. This is something students should plan for. Outside of those working with close synchronisation with another medium (such as in film or TV music), tempo choice should always be fundamentally musical, rather than mathematical.

Chorale 1: Soprano and Bass given

This exercise was, unusually, in 3/4. It was in E major and the cadences, which were largely well-handled by students, were as follows:

Bar 3-4	Perfect in E
Bar 6-7	Perfect in E
Bar 10-11	Perfect in F sharp minor
Bar 14-15	Perfect in A
Bar 18-19	Imperfect in E
Bar 21-22	Perfect in E

Areas of difficulty in Chorale 1 included:

- The notional text where soprano and bass parts differed in rhythm: in both bars 2 and 18 there are two implied syllables despite the soprano having only two notes in bar 2 but four in bar 18
- The addition of a 7th in the B chord leading to the cadence in bar 3-4. To avoid consecutive 5ths (or a dyad – a two-note chord as opposed to a triad) it is necessary to rise to an A from an F sharp (probably in a typical two semiquaver, quaver pattern) rather than fall from a B
- The treatment of the quaver movement in the bass in bar 8. On the final beat the F sharp was most successfully treated as an accented passing note but, if treated in this way, the E sharp should not have been present in either alto or tenor as both the dissonance and resolution would have been heard simultaneously, thereby undermining the effect of the F sharp
- This moment was also an area in which many students introduced consecutives between bass and tenor, if the latter sang a B on the final beat and then a C sharp on the first beat of bar 9
- The minim in both soprano and bass in bar 17. Some creativity was needed here to ensure the music did not stagnate in a ‘static’ minim with no movement in any part

There were opportunities for adventure within Chorale 1, which some more successful and ambitious students took. These included:

- Passing modulations
 - A secondary dominant could successfully be used, for example, on beat 2 of bar 5 and the final beat of bar 17, both creating E7 chords in first inversion
- Suspensions
 - There were a number of opportunities for suspensions including 9-8 on the 1st and 2nd beats of bar 13 and 4-3 on the 1st and 2nd beats of bar 17 (which helped with the potential moment of stasis)
- Third inversion V7
 - The 1st beat of bar 16 was recognised by most students but the final beat of bar 20 was harmonised as a V7d by only a select few

Chorale 2: Soprano only given

Chorale 2 was in G minor and gave students the opportunity to explore multiple different tonal areas. Repeated melodic patterns gave students the opportunity to treat the same shape in different ways harmonically and the quaver movement within the given melody afforded students a dilemma as to how to treat each note (see below).

Areas of difficulty included:

- Cadences
 - Whilst the majority of students presented stylish cadences in a variety of keys, some opted to stay in the key of G minor for every one of the first four cadences which limited the sense of direction in the piece
- Consecutives
 - It was pleasing to see an increasing number of students carefully avoiding consecutives in this series (though in some instances this resulted in other awkward part writing). However, there were some notable places in chorale 2 in which many students were caught out. These included after the cadence points in bars 8 and 10 (N.B. after cadences remains an area of difficulty and contrary motion consecutives were a persistent issue for students) and beats 2-3 of the penultimate bar in which an Eb to D in an inner part often created consecutives with the given soprano line
- Chord choice
 - 2nd inversion chords remain an issue for many students and other than as a cadential 6/4 (in which case the chord is not actually a 2nd inversion chord at all) and the passing 6/4 (which is more stylistic as a passing 6/3 – see above) these are not stylistic and should be avoided
 - With the exception of appropriately-handled dissonances (accented passing notes, suspensions and 7ths – see above) chords should be consonant. Some students were prone to introduce unjustified and, therefore, unsuccessful dissonances into chords

Opportunities to explore further expressive colour included:

- Keys and Cadences
 - Stronger students included cadences in a variety of keys and with no small measure of stylistic flourish. For example, students who began the chorale strongly in G minor (a wise choice) used, in the first cadence, with equal success both a Phrygian cadence in G minor and a perfect cadence in Bb
 - The second cadence was again possible in both G minor and Bb with the latter generally more successful as it avoided using the C on the final beat of bar 3 as the 7th in a D7 chord
 - Many more advanced students reached the keys of F, C minor and Eb with passing modulations incorporated within phrases; extremely stylish descending chromatic basslines were possible against the rising scalar melody, for example
 - A majority of students included an entirely stylistic tierce de Picardie at the end of the final cadence (changes of mode in earlier cadences, as was seen in some solutions were less successful)
- Harmonic rhythm
 - As mentioned above, the incorporation of quaver movement into the given melody gave students a dilemma. In most work only one of the quavers was harmonised as a chord note rendering the second quaver as an auxiliary or passing note. This was acceptable (though when the non-chord note became a 7th it should still have been treated appropriately) though the final beat of bar 6 was problematic: either treat the G as an accented passing note or the F as an échappée. Neither of these treatments were 'incorrect' but neither were they stylistic. A better solution found by some adventurous students was to harmonise each quaver with a different chord
- Suspensions
 - Opportunities for suspension in this chorale were present in every bar and the most ambitious students created chains of suspensions, using increasing intensity to give a sense of direction and emotion to their composition

Brief 2

For this brief, students were required to compose a piece in a progressive rock style, a genre of music that allows for a huge variety of expressive adventure and some ambitious structures. Students were given a specific chord progression that they were compelled to use at least once and were given scope to develop elsewhere in the piece. Specific metres were also required as was the use of drum kit, electric guitar and bass guitar.

The stylistic requirements of the brief were largely adhered to, though some students presented a more generic 'rock' or 'pop' song rather than a piece that sat within the required prog rock style, a style which puts an emphasis on ensemble, expression, storytelling and often contains virtuosic sections all of which help to create a more complex musical landscape than much popular music.

Most students incorporated the given chord progression effectively, with some deft changes to harmonic rhythm and, in some cases, using the final chord cleverly as the first chord of a new

section. However, in some cases the final chord was omitted completely and in others the use of the chord progression was tokenistic, heard once and did not inform the composition.

The required metres, too, were used to varying degrees of effectiveness: more successful students created sections which made fundamental use of the metres, playing to the distinctive character of each and, in some cases, using varied subdivisions of the time signatures. Less successful students used the metres (especially the two irregular ones) in either a tokenistic manner (sometimes at the very beginning of very end of the piece) or merely repeated the final beat to create a longer bar.

Nevertheless, this brief gave great scope for ambitious composers of popular music to explore an extended form, incorporating sophisticated musical language and examiners were treated to some exceptional pieces, both with and without vocal parts.

Brief 3

For the first time since the inception of this specification, this brief required students to compose music for four short film clips, which are designed to promote a winter sports holiday company. The video clips should not have been downloaded and video submissions (as has always been the case for this unit) were not permissible.

Students were allowed to use any acoustic or electronic sounds/instruments/voices and there was a clear instruction to ensure that the four cues contained motivic and stylistic connections.

The clips ranged in length from 25 seconds to 38 seconds and the cues were expected to correspond to the length of the given clips. The majority of students created music that would have synced seamlessly with the footage, though a significant minority did not do so, which was an infringement of the brief.

In such short individual pieces, though, the challenge was to demonstrate not only an awareness of the character of each individual clip, but to incorporate Advanced Level musical language while creating effective motivic and stylistic connections. Less successful submissions focussed on the character of the clips, presenting a clear gesture in each cue, but neglected to include and develop higher order musical features. This manifested itself, at times, in entirely diatonic landscapes and in simple, repetitive chord progressions. Other students found reflecting the different nature of each clip troublesome and the energy of the music for the second clip (the slow panning out) and the fourth clip (the cross-country skiing race) was remarkably similar.

The most significant area of difficulty was creating the called-for motivic and stylistic connections between the music for the four cues. Some students thought carefully about this aspect of the submission and talked about 'branding' in their programme note. In stronger submissions, this branding was then used across the cues to unify the submission. However, a notable portion of student work either did not create these connections effectively or did not compose distinctive enough material to create strong links.

Other aspects that were not always successful were:

- Using distinctive structural changes in the music at moments of no discernible change in the clip
- Creating an overly 'Christmassy' atmosphere, rather than 'sporty'
- The overuse of sound effects, which were rarely effective and, as non-musical elements, could only gain limited credit

Brief 4

Brief 4, the Musical Theatre brief, this year asked for a duet involving **two** (bold taken from the published brief) trapeze artists. As well as a given melody, which the song was compelled to use, students were instructed to write solo sections for both singers and at least one section as a duet.

Instrumentation was also stipulated as at least two and up to eight instruments of the student's choice. As has become the established pattern, typical pit band doublings are accepted as one 'instrument': 'Reed 1' could play clarinet, flute and alto sax (though obviously not simultaneously) whereas 'Player 2' could not double violin, oboe and flugelhorn! Though the brief did not specifically state that backing singers were not allowed, there is a clear implication that this is the case, and this message was given out to centres via NEA Advisers throughout the academic year.

The setting and sense of 'excitement' were captured by many students through the use of effective instrumentation (tubas, accordions, theatre organs etc.) and well-chosen tempi. However, some submissions did not do so and focussed on the 'risks' involved and therefore created something rather more sombre than exciting; students in general found it easier to reflect the element of risk within a livelier setting than excitement within a ponderous one.

Various approaches to texture were seen within the duet sections with more ambitious students electing to incorporate elements of counterpoint and imitation. Conversely, less successful compositions elected to have the two singers consistently in thirds or even octaves or unison.

The given melody was often present in submissions though not always in its entirety or exactly as given (transposition seems to have induced some students to change intervals) and some students decided to metrically displace the melody, which, in losing some of the rhythmic character of the given material, was a small infringement. Many students found effective ways to extend or complete the phrase of the given material, and this tended to be more successful than simply presenting the material in isolation.

More difficulty was found in using the melody as a fundamental component of the piece, weaving it into the piece and also in setting words to the given rhythm. Strong submissions used the melody motivically, utilising fragments of melodic contour and rhythmic patterns elsewhere within the piece and effectively setting text to the rhythm to ensure emphases fell idiomatically. Less successful songs merely shoehorned the melody into the piece (often as a bridge) and created awkward word-setting that did not fit the given material.

It was always helpful to examiners to have a live recording of the vocal parts, and this was pleasingly done by an increased proportion of students this year.

Brief 5

The jazz brief was less popular this year, potentially due to the requirement to write a piece of modal jazz, a style unlike many jazz idioms in that it does not focus on chord changes which use numerous changes of key by the incorporation of 2-5-1 progressions, instead often avoiding strong functional progressions in favour of more static and/or non-functional progressions which are used more for harmonic colour.

Some students created pieces in a more 'typical', tonal jazz style which, though they used modes in the melody, were not examples of 'modal jazz' and therefore infringed the brief. For students who did understand the required style, this brief offered the opportunity to explore the style with many using Miles Davis as a model.

The brief required the use of an irregular time signature, the use and transposition of a mode, at least one solo section (which must be notated), the use of specific instrumentation and was not allowed to be longer than three minutes.

Examiners saw some exceptional work in this brief with some ingenious use of quartal harmony, clearly inhabiting the genre. The strongest work incorporated carefully shaped piano voicings and sensitively expressive solo lines, which were notated incredibly precisely. The use of drum kit was often a key discriminator in the work seen, with stronger students utilising the full range of the kit in a variety of patterns. Some less successful work relied on repeated rhythm section accompaniments that varied little. The strongest work reflected the trajectory of the notated solo within the rhythm section, creating a sense of development and musical journey.

The use of an irregular rhythm often took Dave Brubeck as a model and at times this did create a slightly generic feel to submissions. Other irregular metres are available, and students (and teachers) could fruitfully explore the work of other jazzers.

Brief 6

Brief 6 was the least popular brief once again this year. Nevertheless, the submissions seen achieved marks as broadly distributed across the mark bands as other briefs and centres are encouraged to explore Brief 6 as an option for students.

This brief required students to create a fusion of Indian and Western styles and gave a Rag that had to be used within the composition as well as instructions to incorporate at least one slow and one fast section. Drone had to be heard within at least one section of the music and the piece had to project a spirit of reflection and thoughtfulness. Students had to write for an ensemble of up to six instruments.

The Rag was incorporated into every submission, though not always accurately, and it did not always fundamentally inform the composition. For example, at times it was used in an opening ‘alap’ type introduction and then not heard again. There was also a tendency to create meandering melodic lines rather than strong melodic contours involving motifs that could be heard throughout the piece.

Perhaps the most difficulty, however, was seen in the idea of fusion itself; the Western styles attempted were, in some cases, uneasy bedfellows with Indian raga. At times these styles were juxtaposed rather than synthesised and thus the pieces were not able to capture the real essence of fusion.

Occasionally there were infringements of the brief such as the incorrect number of instruments.

Brief 7

In this brief, students were presented with a poem and asked to write a piece of Neoclassical music reflecting the images and ideas contained therein. There were three harmonic stipulations: the piece must include tertiary modulations, harmonic surprise and non-functional and/or unprepared dissonances. Furthermore, the piece must be scored for four performers (note: not instruments). The piece was to be performed at an art exhibition.

Examiners expected and accepted a broad range of historical allusions for this brief and found the programme note very informative regarding both how the piece was Neoclassical and also which aspects of the poem are being alluded at which points of the piece. Some students explained in some detail their intentions, yet the music did not reflect the description contained in the note, though others effectively (and in many cases far from literally) interpreted the ‘top notes’, ‘strange melody’ and ‘plainsong’ amongst other ideas.

Submissions for standard instrumental groupings – string quartets, piano quartets and wind quartets – were frequently seen as were vocal ensembles. A few students used a mix of voices and instruments.

In many cases, dissonance was used in a highly engaging fashion. However, at times the use of dissonance created a more avant garde landscape rather than a Neoclassical one. In general, both the tertiary modulation and unprepared/surprising dissonances were present and enhanced the composition.

Free Composition

The second, free, composition continues to entice students to produce everything from the sublime to the ridiculous leaving no gaps in between. Ranging from huge orchestral scores to songs incorporating samples of political speeches and from barbershop quartet ditties to guitar-driven rock, the sheer ingenuity of students continues to throw up surprises and keep examiners on their toes!

Once again, there is some general advice about free compositions that continues to be relevant:

In free compositions students are effectively creating their own question. It bears repeating that, whilst inspiration may come from anywhere, the nature of the project and its scope should be chosen carefully to best enable the student's talents to be fully demonstrated at the Advanced Level required in the specification.

What this means in practice is to follow a genre in which the student feels comfortable, but with which a certain level of complexity and creativity can be written into the piece. Having one eye on the published mark scheme can be useful here, but the bottom line is that the music submitted should not be in a style that is overly restrictive (and therefore precluding access to the upper bands for ideas, contrast, development, structure and musical elements) nor overly ambitious (meaning that a successful style is too hard to inhabit or that technical control will suffer).

Examples of submissions which are potentially overly restrictive include:

- Songs based on a simple verse-chorus structure, using the same short chord progression, particularly when the chord progression is entirely diatonic
- Theme and Variations pieces that use a non-original theme: real care must be taken to ensure that enough of the student's own creativity is evident
- Pieces with restricted textures that remain unchanged throughout
- Pieces that remain in the same key throughout, that are entirely diatonic or have a harmonic rhythm that never changes
- Compositions that are highly sectional, or which use a 'sketchbook' approach or present multiple very short movements. These rarely satisfy structurally and offer little opportunity to develop musical ideas, which are two important aspects of the work that are scrutinised against the mark scheme
- Monophonic pieces, especially those for unpitched instruments

Aspects of submissions which set an improbable challenge include:

- Writing effectively for large orchestra (though naturally some can – indeed this series saw some incredibly accomplished orchestral writing) – familiarity with good models and some idea of orchestral technique is needed here
- Writing effective virtuosic writing, particularly for piano (examiners heard a number of pieces that would have sounded impressive when played back in software but were impossible to play in real life)
- Composing extended sections in a contrapuntal style. More often than not, pieces that attempted this type of texture suffered from poor harmonic fit

If centres are in any doubt whatsoever as to the viability of a project, it is very much advised to be in touch with your NEA Adviser.

Despite all of this, there is a sense that students in general are being allowed by centres to play to their strengths in increasing numbers and that the overall quality of submissions appears to be on the up.

Compositions of ‘film music’ or other imagined media projects (e.g. TV cues or video game scores) should come with a clear sense of the scene and intended impact/relationship with what is happening on screen, with scenes/cues written into the score or presented in the programme notes. Filmic music, or programme music with a narrative or story to tell, should have the story in the score or presented alongside the score or as text within the score itself.

Finally, care should be taken with the setting of texts, particularly with regard to notation and underlay, where a score is used. It is also important that, if working in a foreign language, students understand where stressed and unstressed syllables are within words and respond accordingly. Examiners found some notable examples of otherwise good work being let down by an incomplete understanding of language, which is a pity.

General Administration

The vast majority of centres uploaded their work to the Digital Media Portal in a timely manner, for which examiners were hugely grateful. It is helpful to examiners to include the programme note in the PDF of the Score/Lead Sheet/Aural Guide. As per previous Examiner’s Reports, please also note that video submissions are not accepted. Some students tried to be helpful in supplying video files with music embedded for compositions that had been composed to picture – especially for Brief 3 – but these cannot be considered (and in the case of Brief 3, the document sent out by AQA specifically forbade any downloading of the video clips).

It is good practice to include student name, student number and centre number on all supporting scores/aural guides, but particularly on chorales, where the formatting and content is obviously very similar at a glance from one student to another.

Where loops from within software programmes have been used, this must be acknowledged on the CRF. It should be noted that, however carefully these loops have been chosen or decisions made as to their complexity (e.g. within a ‘session drummer’), these have not been composed by the student and will not gain credit beyond the textural function they play. Failure to declare their use runs the risk of malpractice and centres should not authenticate the CRF if loops have been used without acknowledgement.

The CRF must be signed and authenticated by both student and teacher. This can be done electronically by simply typing the relevant name into the box. However, centres will be contacted if either of these is missing as it is a legal requirement.

Any contextual information or requests for special consideration should not be sent to examiners but rather submitted through exams officers to the relevant department at AQA.

Final Thoughts

It is always hugely engaging and ceaselessly interesting to examine this unit; a vast amount of work clearly goes into submissions (by both students and their teachers) and examiners try to approach each piece with this in mind. It is clear that, despite a national trend of declining A Level Music numbers, there are some incredibly creative young musicians in our country and this unit gives a platform for that compositional verve to take centre stage. Long may it continue.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.