



# GCSE **Music**

8271/W Understanding music

## Report on the examination

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## General comments

This component is worth 40% of GCSE marks (96 marks), with the content organised into four areas of study:

1. Western classical tradition 1650 – 1910.
2. Popular music.
3. Traditional music.
4. Western classical tradition since 1910.

Each area of study (AoS) contains four topic areas and specified study pieces. The examination is in two sections and lasts 1 hour 30 minutes.

Section A comprises questions based around short excerpts of music taken from all four areas of study. There are two questions on each area of study and, together, each pair of questions will be worth 17 marks. 48 of the 68 marks available in Section A assess AO3 while the remaining 20 marks assess AO4, focussing on the context within which some of the different excerpts were written. This section covers understanding of musical elements, musical language, and an appreciation of the context in which music was composed.

Section B is worth 28 marks in total. Students answer **two** questions, each worth 14 marks. The questions are based on the study pieces.

**Please note that this is final year of examined questions for these particular study pieces. New study pieces for Section B will be in use from Summer 2026.**

**Question 9** Mozart Clarinet Concerto in A major, K. 622, 3rd movement, Rondo **is compulsory.**

Students then choose to answer **one** of the three remaining questions on either:

Little Shop of Horrors 1982 off-Broadway version – the following three tracks:

- *Prologue/Little Shop of Horrors (overture)*
- *Mushnik and Son*
- *Feed Me*

Paul Simon Graceland album – the following three tracks:

- *Graceland*
- *Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes*
- *You Can Call Me Al*

Zoltán Kodály: *Battle and Defeat of Napoleon* and *Intermezzo* from *Háry János*.  
(Orchestral version with cimbalom and without vocal parts.)

Each question has four parts, the first three requiring short answers (2 marks) and the final question requiring an extended response (8 marks).

The areas of study provide an appropriate focus for students to appraise, develop and

demonstrate in-depth knowledge and understanding of musical elements, musical context, and musical language. It is important to remember that the context within which the music was written is very important and this should underpin all studies.

## Section A: Questions 01 – 08

This section had questions assessing the recognition of:

articulation, dynamics, harmony, intervals, melody, playing techniques, rhythm, sonority (timbre), structure, tempo, texture, time signatures, tonality, and types of chords.

Each question was linked directly to a musical excerpt. There was one question involving the writing of staff notation:

- 05.1 where students were required to fill in **four** missing notes to a given rhythm.

Other question types included short answer questions, multiple choice question and ‘features’ questions.

It is worth noting that in the Section A short answer ‘features’ questions, students can gain credit by answering correctly across all the elements, some of the elements, or even only one element.

For example, in 04.6

- Identify two features of **dynamics**, **harmony** and/or **rhythm** used in this excerpt typical in the British music of Arnold, Maxwell-Davies and Tavener.

students could provide three dynamics answers (or three harmony, or three rhythm), or two dynamics and one from harmony or rhythm answers, or two harmony and one rhythm answer, or even one from each element.

Students and teachers are reminded that the phrase ‘*used in this excerpt*’ is paramount, as this means that some generic features might not necessarily always apply.

## Playback equipment

Centres are reminded that they should provide the best audio playback that they can in order not to disadvantage students when listening to the excerpts. Testing of the audio equipment is allowed as per the paper instructions, and an appropriate sound level should be adhered to throughout the examination. Centres should consider that the clear recognition of dynamics and or effects (for example) if asked about on the 8271/W paper may not be fully audible with lower quality sound systems.

## Question 01

The first two excerpts on the paper were from Area of study 1 (AoS1). Excerpt A was taken from a movement of Fauré’s *Requiem*, with Excerpt B was part of *Schumann’s; Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17*.

The quiet/fairly quiet dynamic and the tonality at the beginning were answered correctly by most students, but the Italian term (and more so) the cadence type was less successfully answered. The melodic movement question had some perceptive responses, and the 01.6 'features' question scored well across the three elements.

## Question 02

Question 02 featured The Who's *Pinball Wizard* and Shakira's *Try Everything* from the film *Zootopia*.

Centres are encouraged to ensure that students name instruments accurately. Perhaps a good analogy for students might be going into a music shop and asking to buy a 'guitar'. The response should be "which type of guitar?"

The MCQ question on the two bass notes was not very successfully answered by students, perhaps showing a lack of understanding of the word "portamento".

The distinctive 'ukulele' sound and the 'perfect cadence' were spotted by a good number of students here, with the features question 02.7 achieving high scoring across the two elements.

## Question 03

Question 3 saw music from the traditional music area of study AoS 3.

Excerpt A was Pedro Capó, Alicia Keys & Farruko's *Calma (Alicia Remix)* and Excerpt B was Maxine Sullivan's *St. Louis Blues*

Noticeable was the significant improvement in many students' identification of the correct 3<sup>rd</sup> interval. 03.3 gave students the opportunity to describe the ways in which the voices had been used, with a wide range of valid answers credited.

The bass instrument 03.4 question gave rise to a range of mostly incorrect answers. Examiners questioned whether some students had read the question as 'brass' instruments rather than "bass" instrument. The identification of two chords used in the excerpt gave rise to a lot of correct answers. Nearly three quarters of students achieved full marks in the features 03.6 question.

## Question 04

Question 4 focussed on music of the Western classical tradition since 1910 (AoS 4), beginning with an excerpt from Copland's: *Symphony No. 3*.

In terms of sonority (timbre) in 04.1 it was disappointing that very few students were able to identify the sound of a French Horn. However, around half of students identified the correct notation of the rhythm of the opening phrase.

Excerpt B was the taken from Peter Maxwell-Davies *Five Klee Pictures*. Despite the use of the word "percussion" in the question, a wide range of incorrect student answers were given across the four families of instruments. Assessing the tempo of a piece of music and giving a suitable Italian word was problematic for over half of students on 04.5. Nevertheless, the features question of 04.6 was very well-answered.

## Question 05

Excerpt A of Question 06 included the dictation question, which was focussed on an excerpt taken from a Mozart symphony.

This was very well-answered this year, with nearly half of the student answers achieving full marks, which is very positive. Indeed, 05.2 was even better, with close to ninety percent correctly identifying the correct family of instruments playing.

Excerpt B turned to Handel's *Solomon*. In a similar vein to Excerpt A, both questions were well answered by students.

## Question 06

Question 06 featured Rock music and Computer gaming music excerpts.

Both Excerpt A and Excerpt B were very well answered, with a noticeably above average number of students achieving full marks on the whole question.

## Question 07

Traditional music was the focus with Karine Polwart's *Follow The Heron* and Ibibio Sound Machine's *Voice of the Bird*.

The short one-mark questions in Excerpt A were all very well-answered apart from the instrumental response, which was often vague.

Excerpt B had a very mixed range and quality of responses, but nearly all students scored one- mark or more on the 07.6 features question

## Question 08

The final question in Section A included two more excerpts from AoS4, featuring Bartók's *Romanian Dances No.1* and Riley's *Be Kind to One Another*.

The questions on tonality and the harmonic feature proved problematic for most students here, with few correct answers. Examiners reported rarely seeing the correct word “modal” as a tonality answer.

The short questions of Excerpt B were also not successfully answered, with the ongoing weakness of noting the correct articulation and interval recognition still prevailing. The ‘features’ question was much more successfully answered by students.

## Section B: Questions 09 – 12

Questions in this section are based on the study pieces named in the specification. No audio excerpts are played, and no scores are allowed into the examination room. There is no requirement for students to make any reference to bar numbers in responses, but where they do examiners do check the location points given for accuracy.

All students must answer Question 09, based on Area of Study 1. Students are then required to choose one of the remaining questions: 10, 11 or 12.

From the optional study works the two most popular choices continue to be *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Paul Simons' Graceland*.

Centres are reminded of the marking guidance for the eight-mark questions found in the mark scheme:

**7-8 marks** A comprehensive response which is consistently coherent and logically structured.

**5-6 marks** A wide-ranging response which is mostly coherent and well structured.

**3-4 marks** A relevant response despite some inaccuracy/omission and weaknesses in terms of coherency and structure .

**1-2 marks** A limited response with some significant inaccuracy/omission and a lack of clarity.

Each of the questions in Section B began with three questions worth two marks each

A significant number of responses neglected to focus on the key words in the question. Whilst credit was given for valid points made, a noticeable number of students seemed to write a lot, for unfortunately very little credit. Additionally, there is no need for any introduction or summary to be included, and examiners did report an increase in bullet points answers, although many bullet points remained unexplained, with some 'scattergun' listing of vocabulary.

*Centres are also reminded that students only have 30 minutes to complete the questions in Section B. This means that they have 15 minutes to spend on each Study piece (the compulsory Mozart and then one other optional piece). Time management is of the essence.*

## Question 09

This question was based on Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A major in D major, K.622 for AoS 1.

09.1 asked for two textures used at the start of the movement, which nearly all students achieved at least one mark.

09.2 was much more specific, asking about the three unaccompanied phrases towards the end of the second episode. This was not answered well by students, but of those who knew where who the movement well, "chromatic" and "semiquavers" were the most popular answers.

09.3 was not linked to a musical element, so a wide range of student answers were creditable. Most successful answers here were to do with the return of the "home/tonic key", "diatonic", "forte/loud" and the "(repeated) A major chords" at the end of the movement.

The eight-mark question involved Mozart's use of **dynamics, melody, rhythm** and/or **sonority (timbre)** in the second episode of this movement.

Centres are reminded that the command word for each eight-response is **Explain** and students are reminded to write about **only** the elements which are asked for in the question in the **section** asked about. Answers ranged across the (scarcely seen) 'comprehensive and highly organised', to the (more frequent) 'relevant, despite some inaccuracy' to the 'explained scattergun' approach.

Students in the main were able to comment on some elements, most commonly dynamics, melody and rhythm. However, there were some rare responses seen with excellent student knowledge and detail of the keys modulated to in the second episode.

Much less work in the Level 3 (wider ranging) and Level 4 (comprehensive) bands was seen. Centres are reminded that for students to access the top band, all elements need to be written about, to make the response comprehensive.

## Question 10

This question focussed on the three songs by *Menken* from *Little Shop of Horrors* 1982 off-Broadway version.

Question 10.1 was well answered, with frequent correct responses involving "blue notes" and the "higher vocal range".

Question 10.2 asked students about two rhythmic features towards the end of the opening song of *Little Shop of Horrors*. The most common (and correct) answers were "syncopated" and "repeated".

Harmony questions for students continue to be noticeably less well-answered across the paper, with 10.3 a case in point. Only a quarter of students achieved one mark here, with a third of students achieving the full two marks.

The eight-mark question 10.4 asked about how **rhythm**, **sonority (timbre)** and/or **texture** were used in *Mushnik and Son*.

Sonority (timbre) was mostly well-known about here, with the rhythm element also well-explained. However, the range of textures used in the song was not as well detailed.

Very little work in the Level 3 (wider ranging) and Level 4 (comprehensive) bands was seen. Centres are reminded that in order for students to access the top band, all elements need to be written about, to make the response comprehensive.

## Question 11

This question focussed on the three songs by Paul Simon specified as the study piece for AoS 3.

11.1 required students to identify ways in which the tempo/tonality change at the start of the second section of *Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes*. This was well-answered by students, with the (rising) modulation from E major to F major, and the faster tempo responses most common.

11.2 was a straightforward question about the technology used in *You Can Call Me Al*. This was well-answered by most students.

11.3 asked about two features of harmony in the horn section of *You Can Call Me Al*. Again, there were a very mixed range and quality of responses, although some students did pick up upon the three-chord riff, or indeed name the individual chords used.

11.4 asked students to explain how Paul Simon created an original song through **rhythm**, **sonority (timbre)** and **structure** in the song *You Can Call Me Al*.

Overall, this was quite well-answered, with most students picking up most marks on the rhythm, and sonority (timbre) elements. Some good structure responses were noted here, with the 20-bar introduction, and precise numbers of verses and choruses often seen in student responses.

## Question 12

Question 12 was based on Kodály's two study pieces specified from *Háry János*. However, whilst this was the least popular optional study piece chosen, answers remained stronger, more detailed, and thus more students' responses achieving marks in the two higher bands.

For the Summer 2025 paper, the three shorter questions in Section B were based upon *The Battle and Defeat of Napoleon*

12.1 asked students to identify two features of dynamics. This was a straight-forward question, and most students scored well here, with frequent correct mention of "crescendo", "extreme dynamics" or "fff" or "ff".

12.2 focussed on the trombone articulation in the middle section, which was mostly well-answered. Most students correctly identified the staccato playing but less wrote "accented" or "tenuto".

The 12.3 question asked about two changes in tempo, which needed to be quite detailed for marks to be awarded. The "Alla Marcia" and "Funeral March" answers were popular, with students also correctly referencing the specific metronome markings.

The final question, 12.4, moved the focus to *Intermezzo* and asked how Kodály has used **melody**, **rhythm** and/or **sonority (timbre)**.

This was well-answered overall, with a lot of detailed responses covering most/all of the elements asked about in the question. The scotch snap and dotted rhythm answers were prevalent for the rhythm element, with a range of melody answers also given. Some student confusion between the instrumentation of both responses was occasionally needed, but there were noticeably more responses in the wider ranging Level 3 band noted.

## Final comments

Students and centres should be congratulated on the improvement in both exam technique and the quality of answers in Section A.

The most common less well-answered questions/oversights concerned:

- articulation answers.
- harmony answers.
- lack of secure Italian tempo word vocabulary.
- explaining how the musical elements are used, rather than just listing some (generic) vocabulary in the extended eight-mark questions.
- only writing about the elements which are asked about in the extended eight-mark questions.
- producing a clear, coherent structure in the in the extended eight-mark questions, rather than adopting a scatter-gun bullet point approach.

It was clear that students were engaged by the variety of musical excerpts across Section A. Equally, the questions on the study pieces in Section B demonstrated some evidence of close study during the course, with some perceptive and comprehensive responses to the questions based on the compulsory and optional study pieces.

## Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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