**AQA**

# AS

# MUSIC

7271/C – Composition
Report on the Examination

7271
June 2018

Version: 1.0

## Composition 1: Composition to a Brief

There were some good answers to all six Briefs, though by far the most popular was Brief 1 (the chorales option), with Briefs 3 and 4 the most popular of the other five.

In the mark scheme for Composition 1, the mark bands each include a phrase relating to the 'use of the Brief' ranging from 'Rudimentary use is made of the Brief' up to 'Imaginative use of the Brief fundamentally informs the composition'. There were, pleasingly, no cases of the essential material of the Briefs being altogether ignored (which has to result in the mark of zero being awarded), but there were cases of the riff in Brief 2 and the chord pattern in Brief 5 making only the briefest of appearances whilst the majority of the piece had no connection with the given material. This approach fundamentally misjudges the essence of writing to a Brief – ultimately a real-life aspect of being a composer.

### Brief 1

A substantial majority of students provided enough evidence to suggest some knowledge of technique and style. Important aspects in handling exercises of this nature will include:
- understanding the tonal context and opportunities for modulation in each phrase
- writing strong cadences
- creating idiomatic vocal lines that use register appropriately to give well-spaced chords
- finding occasions for passing chromaticism
- incorporating some quaver motion, especially via passing notes and suspensions.

The few very weakest solutions had fundamental difficulty in constructing coherent harmony. Above this were a number of submissions in which the use of accidentals had been avoided, leading to some missed (and necessary) modulations, as well as modulations that only happened at the cadence, without anticipation. There were some solutions that found successful modulations, but the result was hampered by technical errors.

Common technical errors included:
- parallel 5ths and octaves (sometimes by contrary motion)
- use of a 7th that failed to resolve downwards by step
- use of a 4th that was not prepared and/ or failed to fall to the 3rd
- an augmented interval appearing in a vocal line
- unnecessary doubling of a major 3rd
- unsuitable use of a 2nd inversion chord
- unlikely chord choices including III, VIb, and V moving to IV
- inaccurately copying of the given melodic line.

It was concerning that there was evidence in some cases that the context of chorales had not been perceived as choral music in which all four voice parts need to be able to deliver the text (which for these questions exists only hypothetically). Where an inner part is found to be reiterating the same pitch as two crotchets underneath the soprano's minim, that context has been lost.

### Question 1

Most solutions supplied a secure imperfect cadence in A minor at the end of the first phrase, though the degree of sophistication varied. Many found the running bass climbing in quavers from tonic to dominant. Occasionally students missed the A minor tonality at the start and harmonised

the first cadence as imperfect in C major – a highly unlikely feature for a chorale that clearly ends in A minor. The second cadence invited the most standard of Ic-V-I cadences, yet many made technical issues involving a $4^{th}$ at b.$3^3$ that did not resolve – as it must – to the $3^{rd}$ on beat 4.

The melodic minims of the cadence in b.7-8 provided a challenge, and there were those who ducked it, writing a cadence of minim chords which, whilst technically correct (sometimes), were static and stylistically lacking. This was particularly the case where another Ic-V-I cadence was used; the choice of II$^7$b at b.$7^1$ was preferable, and this allowed for the bass to move to root position on the second beat.

For the penultimate cadence, many used the same formula as the first cadence, now transposed up a $3^{rd}$ to C major. It was an opportunity to demonstrate some greater variety of skill. The final cadence, also with melodic minims, again required some energy. It was therefore disappointing how frequently submissions arrived on $V^7$ at b.$11^3$ and sit on it for two beats. Using the dominant $7^{th}$ in this way – as a fully consonant note – is stylistically dubious, and loses the potential for introducing it as welcome movement later in the bar.

## Question 2

There were some good responses to this question, and many successfully followed the implications of the bass line, with a passing modulation to the subdominant in b.5-6, and a perfect cadence in the dominant at b.8. Not so many were tonally convincing in the third quarter. The only technically correct option for b.$9^2$ is Vc of A minor – this choice proved elusive. Likewise not many provided a secure Phrygian cadence in E minor in b.12.

Stronger submissions included the iconic chorale chord of $V^7$d on a strong beat: opportunities existed at b.$6^3$ and b.$15^1$. The final cadence was also a text of stylistic awareness: b.$15^3$ is far more convincing as II$^7$b than a simple chord IV, and some ingenuity (or, at least, knowledge of Reimenschneider) is required in order to incorporate the dominant $7^{th}$ into a perfect cadence where the melody rises 7-8 if all technical errors are to be avoided.

## Brief 2

The riff provided for this Brief has a bold energy with repeated quavers, syncopation across the barline, rising chromatic aspects and a silence, pregnant with anticipation.

There were some compositions that competently utilised the riff as the basis for a rock texture, sometimes even daring to transpose it for some later appearances. Good structural thinking was shown by students who used the riff for verses (or choruses) and then had proportionate sections that used other complementary ideas before returning to the riff. The strongest solutions were able to use the melody provided for the riff not only as the bass line in one section, but as a melodic line elsewhere.

Generally, however, there was more potential to adopt the detail of the riff and magnify its bold energy in various dimensions across the piece. The potential of the silence remained unexplored.

## Brief 3

There were some highly entertaining compositions from this Brief, especially those who concentrated more on the context of a children's television programme than the specific

information about the Plantagenet era or the four constituent threads represented by the images in the Brief.

For those enthused by the children's TV concept, there was a danger that creating this character in too facile a way – however convincing in its knowing naivety – reduced the sophistication of the music too much for the context of assessment at AS level.

There were some effective musical evocations of days of yore, and the most successful submissions explored ideas of leitmotif with some success. There was, however, a danger of over-ambition in the scale of instrumentation in some cases.

### Brief 4

This Brief – the setting of lyrics – was approached in a wide variety of styles by students. The character delivering the song is angry; it is advised that anger is best represented in a syllabic style with short, punchy rhythms, however some submissions did not take this approach although some detached 'Don't' or 'Can't' to good effect.

Instrumentation was an interesting aspect to the challenge. Often those writing the accompaniment for a solitary piano found it difficult to use the instrument in a manner that amplified the emotion – the temptation to be always writing notes rather than rests proving a hindrance in this context. An overly large ensemble could also be disadvantageous in a similar way. There were some colourful settings of the lyrics using a very dry texture with bass guitar playing a significant role.

Structure was frequently not well handled here. Only a small minority of submissions picked up on the clear implication inherent in the lyrics of a classic music theatre 32-bar song form.

### Brief 5

The chord progression provided in this Brief deliberately provided a lead for using chromatic harmony and changing harmonic rhythm: qualities that are well suited to a post-GCSE context. Some submissions had success with one of these characteristics; few demonstrated confidence with both.

Most students chose a well-balanced jazz combo and wrote with some insight for their chosen instruments, though there were very few submissions which were written well for both trumpet and saxophone was rare. There was some stylish writing for piano at times, but elsewhere piano textures were unidiomatic and unpianistic.

The strongest submissions were able to construct a complementary chord sequence to use in combination with the one provided. In the brief, the chord pattern has a sense of rising chromatically in the first two bars and ends on a tritone substitution; a balancing four bars that starts with a sense of falling chromatically and ends on the dominant itself (or the tonic) provided a clear expression of taking confident ownership of the composing task. Such thinking illustrates that good composition often includes intelligent preparatory thinking and creativity before writing the notes that belong in the piece itself – a lesson for all.

### Brief 6

This Brief presented two melodic ideas: the first a 4-bar phrase for a verse, the second a 6-bar theme (ending 'imperfectly' on the dominant) for a chorus.

Each required extension, and for this to be done in such a way that enhanced the given material, there was need of some analytical thinking:

- What rhythm patterns are being used?
- What are the strong intervallic characteristics of the melodic ideas?
- What mode is being used?

It appeared that little of this kind of logical thinking was used in extending the material provided; for instance, no submissions explored the inversion of the first idea, which could lead to some very interesting material, and very few provided some kind of answering phrase to the 'chorus' theme that clearly balanced and related, and took the melody to a strong finish on the tonic. The sense of mixolydian mode was frequently not convincing.

**Composition 2: Free composition**

Each work submitted for Composition 2 is, very specifically, unique, and there is therefore a limit to how much can be commented upon that is relevant to all. There was a wide range of music across a number of dimensions:
- musical style
- duration
- instrumentation
- ambition
- ability to develop material
- ability to provide contrasting material
- quality of presentation on paper.

Some of the work received showed authentic musical creativity with a clear sense of a concept for a piece and at least partial success in creating **and** exploring ideas to fulfil that intention; however, some submissions were less successful. Frequent weaknesses included:
- overuse of simple repetition (relevant to both song structures and minimalism)
- difficulty in harmonic writing, including a very restricted palette of chords, total reliance on root positions, and poor sense of harmonic direction and progression
- a heavy – or even total – reliance on diatonicism
- little variety of texture, seen in a limited approach to register, the melody always being at the top of the texture, and unchanging accompaniment patterns
- a lack of exploring register with a heavy reliance on stavebound notes and no changes of clef
- rather aimless melodic writing with little sense of controlling contour or there being a sense of phrase structure
- a restricted sense of instrumental colour due to each player having the same role throughout the piece (melody, bass line, etc).

There is no style of music that cannot be successfully explored in a way that avoids enough of these issues to lift the result to being appropriate for AS level, but some good imaginative thinking needs to inform the creative process.

**Administration**

There are several aspects to be covered in the administration for the Composition component. The examiners are grateful for all the hard work and care taken by teachers in assembling the work. There were, however, some issues in this area this year which are detailed below.

**Scores / Lead Sheets / Aural Guides**

The mark scheme requires examiners to consider the written material submitted with descriptors ranging from 'poor in detail and layout' to 'comprehensive'. Factors to bear in mind include:
- Scores are best edited to include sufficient performance directions and scaled to fit onto a sensible number of pages. Submitting a set of parts is an unacceptable alternative to a score and unnecessary in addition to a score.
- Leadsheets need to have sufficient information to be suitable as a resource for creating a performance of the piece. Therefore an absent melodic line, a lack of information over the kind of textures intended in the accompaniment, and no information on how improvised sections are to be inspired, are all significant omissions.
- Aural guides have considerable potential to inform the examiner about the structure and details of a composition. Careful thought needs to be given as to how best to do this for each composition. It is almost inevitable that some kind of timeline will be needed. An aural guide that refers to bar numbers when there is no score is an impractical way to describe the piece.

Whichever method is chosen for communicating the composition on paper, the examiners recommend that the document need only be printed on A4 and held together with a paperclip. If possible the use of staples should be avoided.

**Recordings**

The majority of submissions relied on computer playback for their compositions, but some were submitted as a 'live' performance. Some students who composed songs helpfully submitted a recording with a singer delivering the text over the computer playback of the accompaniment.

Whilst 'live' recordings are very welcome, it can lead to some significant discrepancies with the score. These should be referred to in the programme note, and it may be a good idea to send a computer-generated version too (as many did).

Just occasionally there was an issue with an incomplete, inaccessible or simply missing recording. Please always check CDs before sealing your parcel. USB sticks are not a preferable alternative.

Please do not make announcements on the CDs. These are not necessary if the track numbers are correctly filled in on the Candidate Record Form (CRF). A track list can be helpful in addition where submissions are provided as a compilation CD.

**Candidate Record Forms**

Nearly all schools and colleges were using the correct 2018 Candidate Record Form (available on the AQA website). Occasionally either or both of the two signatures required were missing. It is recommended that the tidiest way to present a student's work is usually to copy the Candidate Record Form back-to-back on A3 and fold it around the scores and programme notes of the student.

**Final comment**

A full range of work was seen this year, and although there were some less successful composition submissions, nonetheless, there were some submissions that had innovative and characterful music and a confident sense of fascination in the possibilities of this medium of creative expression.

**Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.