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# GCSE MUSIC

8271/P - Performing music  
Report on the Examination

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8271  
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## General comments

This was the first year of the new GCSE Music specification (8271) and the requirements have changed significantly from the legacy specification.

The specification requires students to perform through one or a combination of the following methods:

- playing music
- singing music
- realising music using music technology.

The opportunity to perform as a DJ is now present in both the Solo and Ensemble options.

There must be two performances: one as a **solo** performer, the other as part of an **ensemble**. Each student must perform for at least **four** minutes combined duration and the ensemble performance must last at least **one** minute.

Students must be able to interpret relevant musical elements as appropriate, using resources (eg microphones) and techniques (eg *pizzicato*) as appropriate, to communicate musical ideas with accuracy, expression and interpretation, including phrasing and dynamics appropriate to the style and mood of the music.

This component is 30% of the GCSE marks (72 marks).

The specification gives the following definitions for performing:

### Instrumental (including DJ)/vocal

#### Solo

- A single musician performing solo.
- A soloist accompanied by one other musician.
- Performance of pieces written with an accompaniment intended by the composer should not be unaccompanied.

#### Ensemble

- Music performed by the student in conjunction with at least one other musician (one of which must be the student being assessed), in which each player or singer has a unique and significant role (ie that is not doubled).

#### Solo DJ

- Using turntables (raw vinyl/CDJ) and/or Digital DJ technology (software controller/DVS) to manipulate tracks and demonstrate an understanding and use of a range of techniques. There **must** be a minimum of **two tracks** – beat matched, with respect to the structure, tonality and arrangement of the selected tracks.

### Ensemble DJ

- Using turntables (raw vinyl/CDJ) and/or Digital DJ technology (software controller/DVS) to perform with one or more DJs/live musicians in which each performer has a unique and significant role (ie that is not doubled). For the student being assessed, there **must** be a minimum of **two** tracks – beat matched, with respect to the structure, tonality and arrangement of the selected tracks.

### Production (Technology-based performance)

#### Solo

- A complete performance of a pre-existing piece using music technology, sequencing and/or multi-tracking techniques to record a solo performance of a minimum of **three tracks**. At least **one** track must be performed live in real time.

#### Ensemble

- A complete performance of a pre-existing piece using music technology, sequencing and/or multi-tracking techniques to record an ensemble performance of a minimum of **four tracks**, **three** of which **must** be performed by the student and **one or more** tracks performed by at least one other musician in which each performer has a unique and significant role (ie that is not doubled). At least **one** track **must** be performed live by the student and at least **one** track **must** be performed live in real time by at least **one** other member of the ensemble.

It should be noted that the above refer to a **performance** rather than a **piece** of music. If necessary, students can offer more than one piece to ensure that the minimum time duration is met. Guidance for schools and colleges can be found in the Performing music assessment guide available on the AQA website via the following link:

<https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/music/AQA-82712-PMAG.PDF>

Here it has been made it clear that, where this procedure is followed, students should perform all solos or all ensembles on the same occasion without a break in the recording. This in turn enables the teacher to make a holistic assessment.

Repertoire is to be determined by the student and the teacher, though, of course, in many cases, peripatetic or other instrumental/vocal/technology teachers will be involved. It need not be linked to any of the four Areas of study which make up the core of the new specification and can, therefore, be in any chosen style or genre.

It should be noted that it is rarely appropriate or successful to assign the same performing task to all students in a cohort: there has been evidence of this, with very mixed outcomes. The specification was designed to enable and encourage each student to perform to their strengths.

Students can fulfil more than one role in a performance: for example, they might wish to sing and accompany themselves on guitar or piano. In such cases, they have the opportunity to have their skills assessed holistically. However, it must be made clear on the Candidate Record Form what was assessed by the teacher.

There was a very wide range of submissions, covering most orchestral instruments, rock band instruments, vocal performances in many genres, keyboard (both piano and electronic) as well as some ethnic instruments. Performances must be recorded in the year of assessment – normally during the second year of a GCSE course or Year 11. There is no ruling as to how many attempts a student can have at performing their chosen piece(s) but it is the **final** version which should be submitted to the moderator rather than one which includes one or more false starts.

All performances must be accompanied by an audio recording, playable on a standard CD player. Thus, mp3 files or mixed media CDs are not acceptable. This was not always the case and some schools and colleges had to be contacted to provide a replacement CD in the correct format. While this was done promptly in the vast majority of cases, in just a few it did take some time to be resolved: during which time, of course, the students' work cannot be moderated.

In addition, there must be one or more of the following documents, as appropriate to the type/genre of performance:

- A notated score, providing full performance information through musical notation.
- A lead sheet, providing a detailed framework giving structure and musical substance from which a performance can be produced that meets the composer's intentions.
- A guide recording, if no score or lead sheet is available. If students have based their own performance on a recording of another performance of the same piece, this must be submitted so that it can be accessed easily by the moderator. It is preferred that any guide recording is placed on the CD immediately before the student's performance.
- An annotation, including details of the processes, devices and techniques used that contributed to the final performance. Students must provide details of any hardware and software used.

Students may choose the type of documentation most relevant to their performance, but in the case of production/DJ performances, an annotation is essential to enable teachers and moderators to assess the work accurately. Production annotations need to include precise information regarding 'live' tracks and how they have been recorded.

It is important to note that the simple submission of lyrics, even with the inclusion of chords, cannot be considered as being detailed enough to qualify as a lead sheet for any performance.

Students can perform their own composition if this has not been submitted for 8271/C Composing Music.

### **Solo performances**

As was to be expected, there were some very impressive performances here, across the spectrum of genres and styles. It was most encouraging to receive DJ performances, both solo and ensemble, and some excellent production via technology performances. Students were obviously enjoying so many of these performances and had spent a very long time honing their performing skills and refining their technology-based submissions. It was also obvious that, in the vast majority of schools and colleges, pieces had been chosen with great care, enabling students to perform to the best of their abilities in a style/genre which reflected their strengths and preferences.

A stumbling block for some submissions was the requirement that the 'performance of pieces written with an accompaniment intended by the composer should not be unaccompanied' (specification page 17, section 3.2.1). There were several instances where even pieces set as Grade performances, which included accompanying parts, were submitted as unaccompanied

solos. As a result, this had an adverse effect on the student's ability to realise the style and character of the music.

Similarly, if students perform, for example, a pop song but omit some of the key parts – there were examples where even the actual vocal line was not performed – vital elements of the piece's style and character will inevitably be lost, again impacting on the student's ability to interpret the style and character of the song successfully.

### **Ensemble performances**

The key to performing a successful ensemble is that there must be at least **two** performers performing live simultaneously. Therefore, if a backing track is used for, say a pop song, there must be two performers, one of which must be the student being assessed. This means that a performance where one singer sings to the backing track and then the second singer sings cannot be accepted as an ensemble: only the time during which both performers are singing together is valid in such cases. There are many songs which feature two vocalists, but many of these are for alternating voices. Unison singing does not count towards the ensemble because of the difficulty in differentiating between the voices when listening solely to a recording. An example would be 'For Good' from the musical 'Wicked': where a backing track is used, very little of this is true ensemble singing. The simple solution is to accompany such songs live on piano.

There were many examples of successful ensembles, from duets for two pianos through pieces for piano and voice / flute / violin / trumpet and so on: each of these now qualifies as an ensemble.

Where larger ensembles are involved, it must be easy to hear the part to be assessed without the recording being manipulated to bring the student's part excessively into prominence: again, such action can impact on the student's ability to interpret the style and character of the piece successfully.

In all cases, care must be taken that the student's part is neither overpowered by another performer nor artificially accentuated over that performer. Extreme examples involved students performing to a backing track but listening to that track via headphones: this inevitably meant that the moderator could not hear that backing track and was, therefore, not able to assess how well the student was reflecting the music's style.

It should be noted that only those repeats included by the original composer are acceptable. There were instances where additional repeats had been inserted, either of sections or of the whole piece, just to extend the piece artificially and thus meet the minimum duration: such practice is not acceptable and the moderator timed such performances without those repeats.

### **DJ performances**

There were several examples of DJ performances, both as solo and ensemble: this was very welcome and is an area which we hope will increase as the specification moves forward and more students have access to the opportunity to acquire these skills. Overall, the skill levels demonstrated were very high and were very clearly assessed by the teachers whose schools and colleges submitted such performances. It is important that students submit full details of their performance.

### **Production via technology**

The requirements of this type of performance have already been described (see above). There were some impressive submissions where it was clear that the students involved must have spent many hours recording and refining their work.

The main issue, and this was a relatively rare occurrence, was when others had contributed tracks to a supposedly **solo** performance: this is not permissible within the new specification which is very clear that the solo performance is to be the work solely of the student being assessed. Further clarification can be found to this and many other questions in the Performing music assessment guide available on the AQA website (see above for the link).

Though there were relatively few submissions using technology, those that did come through were generally of a high or very high quality, demonstrating the student's skills in recording and manipulating the material to produce a high quality final performance.

### **Administration**

While the vast majority of submissions arrived by the deadline of 7th May or shortly afterwards, there were some which were very late but had not received an extension from AQA.

The specification requires that performances:

- should take place in a suitable venue in a live setting
- should be recorded using good quality audio equipment
- must be under the supervision of a teacher for authentication purposes
- must take place in the year of certification
- must meet the specified minimum duration.

The specification also requires that:

- audio recordings of performances and production must be submitted complete and without post-performance editing or augmentation
- a copy of either the score(s), lead sheet(s), annotation(s) or guide recording(s) must be submitted with the performance for assessment.

Audio recordings must be saved as audio files to a CD playable on a standard CD player. A full track listing should be enclosed and, where relevant, guide recordings should be placed immediately before the student's performance. For each student, the solo and ensemble performances should be recorded consecutively. With such a track listing provided, announcements on the CD are unnecessary.

The Candidate Record Form should be completed and signed and dated by both the student and the teacher authenticating the performances. Where others have been involved in a performance, this must be clearly stated and their roles detailed.

Each piece of music should be identified by its title and composer; the instrument upon which the student is performing should be clearly named as should all other instruments/backing tracks, especially in the ensemble.

Where an ensemble includes, for example, two female voices, it must be made clear to the moderator which voice is to be assessed and this part must be easily discernible throughout the recording. Obviously, a notated score is the best way of achieving this but, where this is not practical, lyrics highlighted (preferably in colour) to identify the part sung by the student being assessed would be of great assistance. However, these should be used only in conjunction with a guide recording or a detailed lead sheet, the latter giving clear details as to the musical demands on the student in terms of pitch, phrasing, tempo, dynamics, and so on. It is not acceptable to write something such as ‘Upper part’ or ‘First voice’.

The majority of Candidate Record Forms supplied these details but, where they did not, schools and colleges had to be contacted and this delayed the moderation process.

Teacher’s comments are extremely helpful to explain to the moderator the thinking behind the award of marks. However, simply quoting sentences or phrases from the assessment grids without precise reference to the student’s performance is not helpful. Indeed, there were some submissions from schools and colleges where nothing at all was written in some or all of the boxes.

The specification requires that the combined duration of performances be **four** minutes, of which at least **one** minute must be as an ensemble performance. In several cases, this requirement was not met. In others, while the track lengths looked fine, there were examples of periods of silence at the beginning and/or end of the actual recording, artificially extending the track length. Unfortunately in some instances, this meant that performance time failed to meet the required four minutes.

Recordings should be submitted on audio CD: mp3s should not be submitted. Moderators reported a variety of formats being received including USB Sticks and Data Discs containing MP3 Files, AiFF Files and WAV Files. CD recordings should be checked to ensure they have been finished properly and that they will play on standard audio equipment. Please ensure that the track numbers on the Candidate Record Forms are accurate. This is absolutely crucial when students from within a school or college perform the same piece of music for, for example, their ensemble performance.

A Centre Declaration Sheet must be included with the sample of work.

Wherever possible, please try to submit a single CD recording for the whole cohort, in student order, with a clear track-listing. Ensure that the CD is adequately protected during transit: a few arrived broken because of flimsy or no protection.

Some work arrived in ring binders or lever arch files: almost invariably, the clear plastic pockets were torn during transit and the work was loose in the package. Simply submitting the Candidate Record Form for each student with the relevant score(s) / lead sheet(s) / annotation(s) attached with a paper clip, or put inside a clear plastic wallet, is perfectly adequate and such practice greatly facilitates moderation.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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