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# GCSE MUSIC

8271/W - Understanding 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 some of the requirements have changed significantly from the legacy specification. Assessment Objectives AO3 and AO4 are assessed in this component, which require students to:

- demonstrate and apply musical knowledge (AO3)
- use appraising skills to make evaluative and critical judgements about music (AO4).

These are of equal weighting within the component and the component is worth 40% of GCSE marks (96 marks).

The content of this component is 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. Question 9 (Haydn) is compulsory and then students choose **one** of the remaining three questions. Each question has four parts, the first three requiring short answers (2 marks) and the final question requiring an extended response (8 marks). This final, extended answer is required to be written in continuous prose.

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. The excerpts listened to in Section A each belongs to a specific context and each study piece in Section B belongs to a topic area which further helps to define its context, for example the three songs by The Beatles fall within Rock Music of the 1960s and 1970s, while those by Santana belong within contemporary Latin music.

## Section A: Questions 01 – 08

This section included questions assessing the recognition of time signatures, cadences, tempo, texture, timbre, tonality, dynamics, phrasing and form. Each question was linked directly to a musical excerpt. There was also a writing staff notation question (05.1) where students were required to fill in the missing notes with the rhythm given.

New to this specification were questions testing AO4, such as, 'identify **three** features of rhythm, metre and / or melody used in this excerpt typical of Rock music of the 1960s and 1970s.' Music featured in this case was typical Rock music from this period and the clear majority of students responded very well to this question.

An important feature of the wording of many of the questions in the new specification is where a specific number of points or features are asked for. Where this occurs, the examiner will mark the first two or three points, as specified by the question. Therefore, students should not write several answers but must pay close attention to the requirements of the question. Examples of this, in addition to the question quoted above, were:

'Identify **three** features of melody, harmony and / or instrumentation typical of music of the Classical period.'

'Identify **two** features of rhythm and / or texture used in this excerpt typical of contemporary Latin music.'

The phrase 'used in this excerpt' is equally important, as this means that some generic features might not necessarily always apply.

Other question types included short answer questions and multiple choice questions.

Common misunderstandings included definitions of texture: the specification sees a definite difference between 'homophony' (where all parts move in the same rhythm) and 'melody and accompaniment' (where the melody is independent of the rhythm of the accompaniment). The use of the descriptor 'melody-dominated homophony', a relatively recent term, is not really needed but should be reserved for traditional hymn-tune like textures, where the melody line moves in the same rhythm as the underlying accompaniment: it is, in fact, synonymous with 'homophony'.

### Question 01

The first two excerpts were taken from different movements of Haydn's Symphony No. 100, in G major. Students mostly started off well with their responses to the first two questions: the opening dynamics were correctly identified as was the tonality of the first excerpt. The time signature, 6/8, appeared to cause a problem for many. Based on the legacy specification, questions focusing on time signatures tend to be more successfully answered when it is a version of 4/4; recognition of compound time signatures, though improving, still appears to be much weaker.

For Excerpt B, while the second scale ('major') posed few problems, recognition of the chromatic scale was less successful. The tempo of this piece was mostly well identified while the first of the AO4 questions (01.6) produced a wide range of answers. The important things to remember were, firstly, that the features had to be audible in the specific excerpt being played rather than just general features of music from the Classical period; secondly, the first three features given were marked; and, thirdly, the features must fit one of the three given elements (melody, harmony and / or instrumentation).

### Question 02

Question 02 featured music from the popular music area of study (AoS 2). Excerpt A was from The Small Faces' *All or Nothing*. Identifying the correct musical pattern from a choice of four was the

first question: this was generally answered well. In 02.2 the majority of responses achieved at least one mark, the correct responses being ‘minor’ and ‘major’ respectively.

The final question on this excerpt was another AO4 question, focussing on features of rhythm, metre and / or melody used in the excerpt which are typical of Rock music of the 1960s and 1970s. This was generally well-answered, as were the two questions which followed based on Excerpt B, taken from *Girl with One Eye* by Florence and the Machine. In general, questions about timbre continue to be answered fairly poorly, unless, as here, the instrument is the electric guitar. The vast majority of responses correctly identified at least one of the effects applied to the sound of the guitar, with ‘reverb’ and ‘distortion’ being the most common.

### Question 03

Question 3 featured music from the traditional music area of study (AoS 3). Excerpt A was from *Me and the Devil Blues* by Robert Johnson. The only area of the three questions based on this excerpt where students appeared to struggle was the use of ‘falsetto’, which was the correct answer to 03.2.

Excerpt B was from UB40’s *One in Ten*. Whilst many responses correctly identified the saxophone as being the woodwind instrument playing at the beginning and end of the excerpt, there was, overall, a wide range of other answers. The form of the melody in lines 1- 4 was correctly identified by the majority of students as A B<sup>1</sup> A B<sup>2</sup>. This song, like some other reggae songs, is based on just two chords: the first is G minor and students were asked in 03.7 to name the other chord used. This was D minor (Dm), which was recognised by quite a lot of students.

### Question 04

Question 4 focussed on music of the Western classical tradition since 1910 (AoS 4), beginning with an excerpt of part of Bartók’s *Concerto for Orchestra*. The opening melody was played by bassoons, however some students appeared to be confused by the use of the plural here. It is advised that good examination technique is to check how many marks are available for a question: one in this case. A single answer was therefore required, which was ‘bassoon’ or ‘bassoons’. These belong to the ‘woodwind’ family (Question 04.2) while the strings in the accompaniment were playing ‘pizzicato’ or by plucking the strings. Articulation which was the focus of question 04.4 is now a discrete element within the new specification. Although the correct answer was given in many responses, other responses appeared to show some degree of confusion. The time signature was identified correctly by the majority as 4/4 in response to 04.5.

Excerpt B was derived from the opening of *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by John Adams, probably one of the best-known pieces of Minimalist music. This was used as the basis of an AO4 question which asked for **three** features of melody, rhythm and / or texture used in the excerpt typical of Minimalist music. Again, students needed to be sure that they focussed their responses on three features, that each feature could be heard in the excerpt, and that each was typical of this style of music. Nearly all responses gained at least one mark here with many achieving all three.

### Question 05

Question 05 included the staff notation question, which was focussed on an excerpt taken from Schumann’s *A Humming Song*. Students were required to add in five notes at their correct pitches, using the rhythm provided. This question was well answered, with many students achieving all five

marks. Very few failed to gain any marks at all, though one of the main issues here was the lack of precision with which many notated music.

Excerpt B was a short piece of Baroque music. The first question on this excerpt was a multiple choice question requiring identification of the type of voice singing. Although the correct answer, 'bass', was the most popular, all options were chosen to a greater or lesser degree. In 05.3 many responses correctly identified two features of melody, harmony and / or texture used in the excerpt typical of this period.

### Question 06

Question 06 turned to the music of Broadway from the 1950s to the 1990s, with an excerpt from *Wishing you were somehow here with me* by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Many appeared to find questions about intervals challenging. As a matter of examination technique, it should be noted that such questions receive just one mark for a correct answer. Therefore, by including additional information, a response risks negating an otherwise correct answer. For 06.1, the answer was a third and that is all that was necessary to include. Refining it as 'major' or 'minor' risked rendering it incorrect: in this case, the correct addition was 'minor'.

The second part of this question (06.2) also dealt with timbre but, as it concerned **families** of instruments, the overall response was much stronger, with 'strings' being correctly named by many.

It was encouraging to see that many students correctly identified the Imperfect cadence in 06.3 rather than just inserting 'Perfect'.

Film music was the basis of Excerpt B, taken from the Bond film *Die Another Day*. Question 06.4 presented students with four different syncopated rhythms and asked them to identify the one heard at the beginning of the excerpt. This question was generally answered well. The 'distorted guitar' which was the correct response in 06.5 was recognised by many students, as was the 'piano' in question 06.6, these being examples of two different ways of asking for the identification of timbre.

06.7 asked students to identify two features of dynamics and / or rhythm used in Excerpt B typical of dramatic film music since 1990. Although there were many possible correct responses, students had to be sure that the first two they gave were relevant and, as in the other AO4 questions, many strayed away from the elements of music named in the question.

### Question 07

This question returned to traditional music and began with an excerpt from *Harder to walk these days than run* by the Scottish folk singer, Karine Polwart. The first part was a multiple choice question offering five possible instruments, from which two had to be identified as heard during the excerpt. Most students named at least one with many correctly circling both 'accordion' and 'guitar'. For 07.2, as the solo voice was accompanied by varying rhythms, the correct answer was 'melody and accompaniment'. In 07.3, more students correctly identified the 6/8 rhythm here than in Question 01.

Excerpt B was sung by Celia Cruz and featured the Latin American 'salsa' style, this fact providing the correct answer to 07.4. 'Trumpets' played prominently during this song and were correctly identified by many students for 07.5. Finally, question 07.6, another AO4 question, asked for two

features of rhythm and / or texture used in the excerpt typical of contemporary Latin music. Most responses provided far more than two features but, as there were many features of particularly rhythm which could be heard, many gained both possible marks.

### Question 08

The final question in Section A included two more excerpts from the Western classical tradition since 1910 (AoS 4). Excerpt A was the opening of Tavener's setting of *The Tyger*. The type of voices first heard in this choral piece asked for in 08.1 was tenor. Again, students appeared to find the identification of intervals, as required for question 08.2, challenging. This interval of a fifth gave rise to a very wide range of responses, covering virtually all intervals within the octave. The simple 'fifth' was all that was required to gain the one available mark but, again, several potentially correct responses were negated by the addition of an invalid refinement. The fact that the excerpt was sung by a male voice choir was correctly identified by the vast majority of students whereas the harmonic device, the focus of 08.4, was much less frequently identified correctly. In many responses, it appeared that the term was simply not understood. The correct answer was either 'pedal' or 'drone'.

Excerpt B was taken from *The Red Pony* by Copland, the opening loud dynamics being in sharp contrast to the more subdued Excerpt A. The use of an 'anacrusis' in the melody was recognised by many students, as was the final Perfect cadence. The final AO4 question in Section A asked for the identification of two features of harmony and / or instrumentation used in this excerpt typical of 20th century music. Many responses referred to the use of dissonance, though a simple list of some instruments was not sufficient to provide a successful answer regarding instrumentation. Stronger answers highlighted the prominent use of either brass or percussion instruments or the fact that it was played by a very large orchestra.

### Section B: Questions 09 - 12

Questions in this section are based on the study pieces named in the specification. No excerpts are played and no scores are allowed into the examination room as these are not necessary for the types of question asked, given that students will have been studying these for two years. There is no requirement for references to specific bar numbers, though some were given in the Haydn, mostly very accurately.

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 question 10, 11 and 12, 10 (Area of study 2) was by far the most popular, with 11 and 12 having roughly the same number of students responding to them as each other. In the majority of cases, where a student wrote a good response to question 09.4, they also did well in part 4 of their other question.

Extended responses to part 4 of these questions must be written in continuous prose in order to meet the marks descriptors for the top two levels. For example, Level 4 requires 'a comprehensive response which is consistently and logically structured'.

Marks in these bands could not be achieved, therefore, where responses consisted of bullet points or such short sentences that they were, in fact, little more than bullet points. Guidance on this and other aspects of the 'Understanding Music' component, can be found in the 'Component 1':



Understanding music assessment guide' available the AQA website via the following link:

<https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/music/AQA-82711-UMAG.PDF>

Points made had to be linked to the focus of the question, whether that be 'balance and contrast' in 09.4, 'innovative' in 10.4, 'reflecting grief' in 11.4 or achieving a 'sense of excitement' in 12.4. Several responses failed to focus on these key words, whilst in 09.4 some compared the second movement of the Haydn symphony with the first: only the **second** movement is the study piece. Several responses to each question were simply a list or description of different events within the music, again failing to answer the question. The important key words in each question were the command word, 'Explain', and then the precise focus area of each. Some responses seemed to consist merely of a succession of facts without any attention to the question as set.

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

With reference to the study pieces for areas of study 2 and 3, when commenting on how composers or groups use musical elements, it should be remembered that lyrics to a song are **not** a musical element.

### Question 09

In Question 09, which was based on the second movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 101 in D major, 09.1 reflected the important role of the string instruments in the Classical orchestra, asking students for two ways in which this was emphasised by Haydn at the beginning of the movement. This last phrase was important as it was here that the use of *pizzicato* strings created the 'ticking' effect and that the main melody/theme was played by 1st violins.

09.2 asked for two ways in which the brass instruments were used in the movement. While many responses identified two ways, the fact that more than two were often given tended to mean, in several instances, that both marks could not be awarded, for example, in cases where the second way given was incorrect.

09.3 focussed on the fact that there are different key signatures, reflecting the use of transposing instruments and, therefore, the need to notate their music at different pitches.

When answering 09.4, students must bear in mind the new question type as well as the need to write in continuous prose. There was a wide range of approaches but, unfortunately, many responses were in bullet points, thus affecting access to marks in the top two levels.

Careful planning and judicious choice of elements is key to presenting a strong response to this type of question: many did this, whether relatively concisely or at some length. Dynamics, tonality, rhythm and use of instruments were the elements most featured and these gave ample scope for making clear points concerning both balance and contrast.

Additionally, especially with the Haydn, simply referring to 'Section A2', 'Section B', the 'first episode' or using other similar terms is not sufficient without clear identification in musical terms of which section is meant. Some precise musical reference or description is needed in responses.



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### Question 10

Question 10 focussed on the three songs by The Beatles specified as the study piece for this area of study, beginning with the question 'Identify **two** ways in which a dreamy atmosphere is created in the first four bars of *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*'. A common error was to write about the music **after** these first four bars, commenting, therefore, on vocal and guitar parts, none of which features in bars 1 - 4.

Question 10.2 offered many possible answers but responses needed to ensure that it was clear where they were referring to the chorus or an earlier section when making a point. Changes of tonality, tempo, dynamics, rhythm and pitch all provided scope for valid responses.

Question 10.3 was very well answered, with few students unable to identify two of the Indian instruments heard in *Within You, Without You*.

In response to Question 10.4, several responses incorporated clear references to *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* or *Within You, Without You*, which were irrelevant to the question which focussed on *With a Little Help from my Friends*. As already mentioned, a key word here was 'innovative' but some responses altered this to terms such as 'interesting' or 'catchy', which affected opportunities to gain marks.

### Question 11

Question 11 focussed on the three songs by Santana specified as the study piece for area of study 3. 11.1 was a straightforward question, requiring students to match styles/genres to the songs given. Similarly, 11.2 asked for the two instruments which make up the 'horn' section. Unfortunately, some responses included 'horn' as one of the instruments rather than the correct two, trumpet and trombone. This question was, however, well answered overall.

Question 11.3 referred to the sense of tonal ambiguity found in *Migra*. Unfortunately responses often made statements but failed to explain them. Many wrote about specific modes without identifying what it was within that mode which created the sense of ambiguity.

Question 11.4 asked students to 'explain how Santana used musical elements to compose *Love of my Life* in a manner which reflects the grief he felt after the death of his father'. As with the other extended answer questions, to show coherence and logic, students must not only identify a point but must explain how it has relevance to the question.

Although there was some confusion over the numbering of the symphony used, with several responses referring to it as Brahms' 101st, or even inferring that Santana's father had written the symphony, the majority correctly assigned it and homed in on how Santana had manipulated the melody in terms of its rhythm and tonality, how he had used a call and response texture between voice and guitar to give a sense of a conversation between father and son or a sense of a link between classical and rock music, how the dynamics remain subdued virtually throughout as well as the use of a monotone opening vocal, all adding to the rather sombre feel and reflecting his sense of grief. Many wrote of the heartfelt nature of the guitar improvisation.

### Question 12

The final question in Section B was based on the study piece by Copland which comprises two movements from *Rodeo*. 12.1 refers to the ways in which the oboe melody in *Saturday Night Waltz*

is accompanied on its first appearance. Here, precise context is important and also the wording of the question which requires students to ‘identify **two** ways...’. The melody comes after the introduction and stops before the falling third in the flute and is lightly accompanied.

Question 12.2 focussed specifically on the central *meno mosso* section of the same movement. As the Italian tempo marking was translated as part of the question, there could be no credit awarded for referring to this. Instrumentally, there were clear points to choose from, including the fact that the main melody was played by the clarinet, there was a countermelody in the viola and the trombone was muted.

Question 12.3 asked how this third movement is brought to a close. Again, there were many possible points to be made and most responses gained one or both marks.

The final question, 12.4, moved the focus to the last movement, *Hoedown*, and asked for an explanation of how Copland used musical elements to achieve a sense of excitement. Students found a lot to write about, especially as far as rhythm, timbre and dynamics were concerned, and most were able to restrict themselves to these three elements and produce strong responses.

The mark scheme regularly states ‘Any other valid point’ at the end of AO4 questions. This meant that points made that were relevant and correct could be awarded credit even when they did not feature in the mark scheme indicative content.

### **Final comment**

It is clear that the majority of teachers and students have embraced the new specification. The most common oversights concerned:

- questions which asked for a precise number of ‘features’ or ‘ways’ where a lot of responses were well in excess of the designated number given in the question
- part 4 of questions in Section B which needed to be written in continuous prose to provide a coherent and logical response and, therefore, enable responses to access the top two levels.

It was obvious that students were engaged by the variety of musical excerpts in Section A and responded well right through to the end of Question 08. Equally, the questions on the study pieces in Section B demonstrated evidence of close study during the course with some excellent answers to all questions based on the 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.