



A-level **Music**

7272/C NEA Composition

Report on the Examination

7272
June 2024

Version: 1.0

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General Comments

This year marked the first time since 2019 that two full consecutive series of the full composition requirements have been submitted and then externally marked and moderated. The specification is a familiar one now to many centres and there is a pleasing correlation between the work seen this year and that of 2019.

As always, the range of creative expression and sources of inspiration for students' work is wonderfully diverse and is always broadening.

Composition to a Brief

The compulsory first composition allowed students to choose from seven set briefs, all of which relate loosely to the seven Areas of Study within the specification. Of these, chorales proved enduringly popular, with very nearly half of students opting for these exercises. Brief 5, with its given Latin inspired riffs, was next popular, with nearly 15% take-up. Briefs 3 and 4 were next most popular.

For every composition to a brief (aside from chorales, which have their own mark scheme), there are constraints and stipulations to be followed. Whilst some of these are suggestions, many are requirements and, where a student or teacher are unsure about any of the parameters or requirements, the centre is strongly advised to contact its NEA Adviser with the query, so that additional guidance or clarification can be given. Whilst serious infringement of the brief is still rare, minor infringements are still occurring and some of these reveal a less than thorough reading of the rubric for the brief in question. It cannot be overstated that time taken to consider the possibilities of the given brief and the context for the music (sustainable development exhibition, fitness app, carnival celebrating Latin-American culture, etc) is extremely well spent *before* the process of composition begins.

Where musical stimulus material was provided (ie briefs 2, 4, 5, 7), it is enormously helpful to examiners to know where and how students believe they have used it. A mention in the programme note, annotations in the score or comments in an aural guide can assist with this and many students this year thought to do this. As in previous series, the best work integrated the given material seamlessly into the final composition and, where applicable, developed it in an interesting way that made the whole composition feel organic and homogenous.

Brief 1: Chorales

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. It is important to 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 occasions where the given material was altered or miscopied in some way by students. This 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 work the exercises. Additionally, there was a small handful of instances of obscuring the melody via the alto part crossing above it. This should be avoided.

As has been stated in previous reports, whilst 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.

The following general advice is very similar to that given in the 2023 report, 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 (ie 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), as well as consecutive unisons
- Unprepared dissonances (4ths, 7ths and 9ths)
- Dissonances (4ths, 7ths and 9ths) that fail to resolve downwards appropriately
- 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, eg C - F# - 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
- 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, the passing 6/3 (linking two I and Ib with vii°b) 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.

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 use the default tempo of the chosen score writing package, 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

The exercise was in F major. Cadences, which were generally well spotted, were as follows:

Bar 2	Imperfect in F
Bar 4	Perfect in F
Bar 6	Imperfect in F
Bar 8	Perfect in C
Bar 10	Perfect in C
Bar 11-12	Perfect in D minor
Bar 14	Interrupted in F
Bar 16	Perfect in F

The first phrase caused many students difficulties when trying to enrich with quaver movement. A well-intentioned tenor passing note on the very first crotchet caused parallel 5ths with the soprano in a number of solutions and attempts to imbue this phrase (and others) with auxiliary notes gave movement but no enrichment, sounding a little unstylish in the process. The cadence provided a chance for a 4-3 suspension, that was gladly taken up by many.

In the second phrase, b.3²⁻⁴ offered an opportunity for a 7-6 suspension if a I - vii°b – Ib progression was used. Many also spotted the opportunity for a secondary dominant (with 7th acting like a suspension) at the cadence.

In b.6⁴, deploying a V⁷d (rather than iib) is a more compelling start to the 4th phrase and leads nicely into the Ib chord at the start of b.7. The cadence of the 4th phrase has potential to lose momentum with the minim in both given parts. Most students took the opportunity to have some movement carrying on in at least one of the inner parts, but repeating notes should be avoided as they undermine the implied text.

At b.10⁴ there is an opportunity to intensify the harmony over the repeated bass with a dominant 7th. It was pleasing to see these instincts followed through in some students’ work. Although a good many students harmonised the cadence at b.11-12 in D major, which is entirely possible, D minor is a more

logical choice here: it is the relative minor of F major, provides a minor mode perfect cadence and is also closer tonally to F major than D major, which would feel quite extreme without some flatter-side tonal counterbalance elsewhere in the chorale.

A number of students used a passing 7th at the end of bar 12 to add momentum into the penultimate cadence, and a few were able to follow the conjunct quavers imitatively through different voice parts (using the given bass passing notes at 13² as one of the iterations). This made for pleasing flow and interesting part-writing.

In b.14, moving into the last cadence was another danger area for parallel 5ths, especially in contrary motion between tenor and bass. Another opportunity for a 7-6 suspension was offered in b.15 and many students used a ii⁷b – V⁽⁷⁾ – I progression in the final cadence.

Chorale 2: Soprano only given

This exercise was in A minor and to acknowledge this means to begin the chorale in this key, rather than to open in C major. The reason for this is one of tonal balance and also to avoid the tonality becoming progressive. However, there is no reason why students could not move to C major by the *end* of the first phrase, which would be stylistically appropriate and tonally dynamic.

One major challenge with this exercise was the large number of cadences that imply perfect or imperfect cadences in A minor. With some of these enforced (such as the two phrases ended on G#), it made more imaginative solutions turn to passing modulation within phrases in order to give the chorale greater tonal reach.

Another challenge was that the melody of the second and last phrases was identical. Better solutions acknowledged this and tried to do something different second time around.

The **first phrase** (opening – b.2³) suggests opening with a perfect cadence into A minor, which might be via V or Vb (opening with a 7th is unstylistic as there is no way for the dissonance to be prepared). More adventurous solutions opted for modulations to C major or even an imperfect cadence in D minor in this phrase, both of which work well. However, an imperfect cadence in A minor is also logical.

The **second phrase** (b.2⁴ – 4) really needs to be a perfect cadence in A minor, and many successful openings to the phrase used Vb – i, with or without a passing 7th. This was especially elegant as a solution for those students who had modulated in the first phrase.

The **third phrase** (b.4⁴ – 6³) is most likely to be an imperfect cadence in A minor, though there is opportunity for a passing modulation to C major at the start of the phrase to give some tonal variety. A few daring students tried to make a perfect cadence work in E major here (IVb – V⁷b – I), but a secondary dominant approach to an imperfect would give the necessary variety without skewing the tonal scheme. It should be remembered that E major is a full four stages sharper than A minor and an unlikely tonal area to be included in this chorale.

The **fourth phrase** (b.6⁴ – 8) offered a number of possibilities at the cadence and posed a challenge at the beginning, with A repeated in the melody. Options at the cadence included:

- A perfect cadence in C
- Imperfect in A minor (Phrygian)
- Imperfect in D minor (Phrygian)

Over the next three phrases the tessitura of the melody reaches its highest pitches and sensitive students were able to match this with enriched harmony, passing modulation or increased momentum. This was also an opportunity to keep the tenor in a higher register and to widen the spacing between soprano and bass accordingly.

The **fifth phrase** (b.8⁴ – 10¹) is most likely as a perfect cadence in C major (though this felt odd coming so soon after another perfect cadence in the same key – this is a short phrase). The quaver C at the end of b.9 is best handled as a note of anticipation, with crotchet movement underneath in at least one part. Where the fourth phrase had been handled as a Phrygian in A minor, opting for D minor harmony at the end of b.8 felt odd (the progression from V to iv is awkward). An elegant solution by some students was to harmonise this as IVb in C major and use the anacrusis to launch into an early modulation from A minor to C major, with the perfect cadence at the end of the phrase cementing the move.

In the **sixth phrase** (b.10² – 12¹) the options for the cadence are perfect cadences in either F major or D minor, both of which were seen. There was also ample opportunity for passing modulation here at the start of the phrase, with passing modulations to A minor or F major then D minor possible before b.11.

The descending contour of the **seventh phrase** (b.12³ – 14) also allowed for various passing modulations (D minor, G major, C major), but made an attempted modulation to E major by the end (see notes on the third phrase above) highly unlikely with no supporting accidentals in the melody prior to the cadence itself. Another strong gambit with this contour was to set up a chain of suspensions, which some more advanced solutions were able to do stylishly and convincingly. An imperfect cadence in A minor is the most logical option at the cadence, but taking opportunity to modulate on the way elevated a number of solutions.

The **penultimate phrase** (b.14⁴ – 16³) contains a repeat of b.7 in b.15 so again there is an opportunity for students to do something different this time around. The majority of students opted for a straightforward ic – V – i perfect cadence in A minor here, on the basis that they intended to offer a tierce de Picardie in the final cadence. An interrupted cadence was also possible here (though difficult to make work without a doubled major 3rd in the final F major chord) and this was a logical and stylish option for a penultimate cadence. One or two students opted for a tierce de Picardie both here *and* in the final cadence, which showed incomplete understanding of the nature of the feature.

As previously stated, the **final phrase** (b.16⁴ – end) is melodically identical to the second phrase. Ways that students could vary their solutions included use of more advanced harmony, a different bass contour or a secondary dominant at the cadence, in addition to the stylish (and frequently seen) tierce de Picardie. Minor mode chorales that end in the tonic minor are certainly seen, but they are far outweighed by those that offer a major-mode ending.

Brief 2

Students were instructed to compose a track in EDM style, using *and developing* the three given riffs. Although there was flexibility about the chosen forces used, the brief stipulated at least five instruments (whether electronic, acoustic, voices or a combination thereof). The time limit for the track was 3 minutes and the music is to be used to promote designer clothing made from recycled materials at a sustainable development exhibition.

Electronic Dance Music encompasses a range of sub-styles and is a relatively broad church. Some characteristic features might include:

- strong rhythmic drive and intricacy, through layers of drum machine/drums and associated percussive layers
- Manipulation of the audience experience through controlling the intensity of the music; associated features such as the ‘build’, ‘drop’ and ‘breakdown’ all serve as tools for this purpose
- Reliance on repetition, but with enough textural/timbral variety and complexity to ensure that the music maintains interest
- A memorable hook or riff that may return to articulate a climactic moment
- Careful control in the building and reduction of texture, which may be sudden or gradual according to context.

The strongest work in this brief was able to integrate the given riffs and take them forward in the music, so that the stipulated development was obvious (reference to the riffs’ use in programme notes, scores or aural guides was also very helpful and appreciated by examiners). It also served to manipulate audience experience and to creatively shape the music in a way that was both musical and stylish. Although not stated, a faster tempo (c.130-140BPM, which is something of a ‘sweet spot’ with a number of sub-styles of EDM) is likely to be most effective with the given material, though some students managed to make slower tempi work effectively.

Less confident work in this brief showed little or no development of the given riffs, and made dubious choices about how and when to use the riffs at all. There was some miscopying that was seen in this brief, such as using b.2 as a broken chord of C minor rather than C major in riff 1 and some misreading of rhythms in riffs 2 and 3. In a similar way, a few students went for a ‘force legato’ interpretation of Riff 2, removing the rests and robbing the idea of some of its most distinctive rhythmic personality. Weaker work showed a less convincing sense of style or a rather static dramatic intensity to the music, as well as struggling to find a meaningful structure to sustain its ideas.

Brief 3

The idea of writing music for a fitness and wellbeing app appealed to a significant number of students and this was the third most popular brief overall, after chorales and brief 5. Each of the given features had a range of durations apart from the interval training section at the conclusion, which was required to be 60 seconds exactly and to have a ‘countdown’ gesture in the final 10 seconds.

The music was stipulated to be written for a combination of acoustic and electronic instruments; a few students neglected to write for anything acoustic in their finished compositions.

Strong submissions for this brief unified the four features through use of a common musical cipher/ident/motif and/or a similar timbral palette. The disparate functionality of each idea needed sharp characterisation and to ensure that the music was subservient to this function. Sections 1 and 4 were usually most successful in this regard, but some ingenious methods of ensuring that the menu music could be looped were found, including repeatable mediant-relationship chord progressions. The countdown feature in the final section was creatively handled in the best work, whether a sampled vocal or an obviously shifting repeating idea that grew in intensity to the end.

Because of the different needs of different sections, less confident compositions had less well demarcated musical moods or styles or missed the defined function of the music in question. The third section, which was focused on meditation and mindfulness, was usually overly active/rhythmic or lacking

in suitable poise/peace. This was most likely because students lacked the confidence to do more with less here, and to find other or more subtle ways of providing interest without being overly intrusive.

Infringements of the brief through timings were extremely rare here, as befitting a compositional style that is so symbiotically linked with synchronisation. However, the absence of any discernible countdown gesture was felt in a small minority of students, and in others this gesture was perhaps overly subtle.

Brief 4

Students were required to write the opening number of a musical, setting the scene of an imaginary planet where natural resources were running out. The song had a number of stipulations, including writing for full chorus, providing lyrics (the quality of which was not assessed) and using the given melody and bass outline within at least one of the sections of the number.

Strong work responding to this brief had a clear mood of concern and integrated the chorus well (usually representing the voice of the people), whether or not principal characters were used. The drama of the situation was captured well, and the stipulated pit band (of between three and seven instrumentalists) was used deftly in support of the voices. Some of the most creative responses varied choral texture well, using imitation, dialogue with a protagonist, splitting the chorus into two parts doubled at the octave or judicious use of choral unison writing. The given melodic and bass outline was also used thoughtfully; some students prefigured its first appearance, making it more effective; some used it as a contrasting section within their number. A few were able to treat the melody as a running thematic idea, using it as a countermelody to the vocal writing, or as a means of articulating interludes between the main sections.

There was a small amount of confusion as to the meaning of ‘chorus’ in this brief, although the wording of the brief makes it clear that chorus is meant as a body of singers, some took this to mean chorus as a structural section (as opposed to a verse). This meant that in a handful of cases there was no choral element in the submission and this was unfortunately an infringement of the brief.

Less confident solutions underused the chorus or only used it very sparingly, choosing instead to focus on solo writing. Chorus writing that was entirely chordal was also seen, with varying success in the part-writing. Weakening the role of the chorus made it harder to dramatise the situation.

The lack of given text in this series meant that students needed to think carefully not only about lyrics but also about creating a logical structure for their song. This led to some offerings that had an almost ‘stream of consciousness’ feel to them, with little structural coherence across the song. Some submissions showed a less than secure grasp of writing for chorus, including overly high or local vocal ranges (including extremely high soprano or tenor parts for extended passages), and others found controlling the textures of their chosen instrumentation difficult. However, there was a lot of good work that had clear models for both choral and instrumental writing and a flair for capturing the dramatic mood. Where live vocals were provided on recordings, these were also greatly appreciated by examiners.

Brief 5

Students choosing this brief had to write a Latin-inspired piece for a jazz ensemble of up to seven instruments, to be performed at a carnival to celebrate Latin-American culture. Three melodic riffs were provided, all of which should have been used in the final composition. In addition, notated solo sections needed to be written for two of a stipulated list of instruments.

Although most students were able to use the riffs to help imbue the carnival atmosphere, others found the Latin-American style hard to capture or found writing music of the same character as the given material difficult. Examiners look for how the given material can be integrated into a convincing whole and, where the most convincing material is provided, this shows a less than secure understanding of the style. Riff 2, with the most complex implied harmonic profile, was often found to be the most difficult to employ, though a number of students were able to pick up on the implied sequential harmonic progression and to use it to good effect. There was also some confusion between riffs 1 and 3. Although students were told that the riffs could be layered, some care was needed here, especially as each riff has its own harmonic implications and this was ignored by some, leading to moments of confusion with chords *i* and *V* being suggested simultaneously.

Although altering and developing the riffs is to be encouraged, the original versions of the material had to be seen at least once somewhere in the composition and some students made finding the original riffs difficult. There was also a small amount of misreading what occurred within the riffs, such as interpreting the B natural of Riff 1 bar 2 as B flat or getting the rhythm of riff 2 wrong.

Success in this brief was concomitant with stylistic flair and rhythmic vitality, as well as strongly idiomatic and well-defined solos. A logical structure was also needed to ensure that the musical journey was a satisfying one. Work that didn't meet its potential was often compromised by unrealistic, unidiomatic or bland solo writing, overly complex rhythmic textures (which threatened to confuse the intended groove), and unconvincing use of the given material.

Writing well for a rhythm section in any jazz style is also a skill that examiners look for. The keys/guitar, bass and drums need to function as a unit and can help to punctuate gestures and clarify structure. Where a keyboard instrument is used with an instrumental bass, reconciling these two low parts within the texture is important to ensure harmonic clarity – often software will not highlight this discrepancy aurally as much as would be the case with live instruments.

Brief 6

Although the least popular brief, this was attempted by a significant minority of students. The invitation to compose a piece celebrating cultural diversity, using given textures and including certain musical features, elicited some creative attempts to fuse diverse traditional music through instrumentation and/or technique. However, this also presented challenges in creating a soundworld that was still convincing on its own merit. Some students were very helpful in elucidating the reasoning behind some creative choices, or explained why a certain rhythm, mode or harmonic pattern had been used, linking back to a musical culture that had been studied prior to composition. Almost all submissions for this brief were instrumental in conception, rather than vocal.

Of the stipulated features, monophonic writing was surprisingly not found in some students' work, and hemiola proved to be incompletely understood by others. Hemiola is a cross-rhythm most commonly found in triple metre, where two bars of three beats is made to sound like three bars of two beats. Students could have helped examiners further by explaining exactly how and where the brief had been met, though others were incredibly helpful (and possibly over-detailed) in their explanations.

Brief 7

This was another brief attempted by a small but significant minority. Students were instructed to make use of three given rhythmic motifs in creating a piece of instrumental music (solo, ensemble or orchestral). In addition, compositions needed to include a modal melody, pedal notes and ostinato.

Of these features, a few students demonstrated that their understanding of pedal was incomplete. A true pedal is a *harmonic* device involving harmonies that evolve over/around a consistent pitch (whether consonant or dissonant to that pitch); confusion arose when students felt that a sustained or reiterated note around unchanging ostinato would meet this obligation, when in fact they had simply written a drone rather than a pedal.

The rhythmic motifs were seen used creatively and in combination to create an interesting kinetic landscape, though some of the notation of the rhythms in the chosen time signatures (a wide range of these was seen) was rather unhelpful to the performer and showed a less than grateful awareness of how the given rhythms might be best read in some metres. Less convincing was deploying the rhythms on repeated notes and subsuming them within an instrumental texture that rendered them practically inaudible. This tended to divest the given material of its character and, indeed, its potential. Whilst contemporary music festivals allow for a range of styles, inevitably some responses used the given rhythms as the sole contemporary element, with a rather blander approach to melody, harmony and structure. As with other briefs with given musical ideas, students who signposted their thinking, whether in their programme notes or in the score/aural guide, helped examiners to understand intentions clearly.

Free Compositions

As has been previously mentioned, the sheer range of styles, influences and creative starting points for students' second composition is impressive and encouraging. The diversity of projects shows no sign of decreasing and this is good news for the future of the art.

The following has been consistently stated and is adapted from last year's report: 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 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 overly restrictive include:

- Songs based on a simple verse-chorus structure, based on the same short chord progression
- 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 (sometimes students erroneously cite this as a 'minimalist' style in their programme notes)

- Compositions that are highly sectional, or which use a ‘sketchbook’ approach. 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. Examiners are still seeing a lot of this kind of piece.

Aspects of submissions which set an improbable challenge include:

- Writing effectively for large orchestra (though naturally some can, and do) – 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)
- Writing in an advanced harmonic idiom or complex time signatures.

Despite all of this, there is a sense that students played more to their strengths this year and have put some real thought into how their projects might be realised. It is also true that students offering music production projects (in a range of styles) with aural guides are accessing ever higher marks for work that is clearly being written with the published mark scheme in mind and with real ambition demonstrated.

Some students tried to be helpful in supplying video files with music embedded for compositions that had been composed to picture, but it is important to note that video files are not accepted. This means that any composition produced should be written to be scrutinised from the audio and supporting documentation (score or aural guide) only.

Compositions of ‘film music’ or other imagined media projects (eg 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’s 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

This was the second year that the Digital Media Portal was used for submissions. Most centres were adept at submitting their NEA work via this portal but the following is a handy guide for the formats that various types of documentation should be uploaded in for future series:

Candidate Record Forms (CRFs)	Word or PDF document
Scores Aural guides Programme notes	PDF (please use one single PDF for chorales, on multiple pages as necessary)
Audio recordings	mp3, wav or aiff

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, but these cannot be considered.

It is good practice to include **candidate name, candidate 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.

Candidate Record Forms (CRFs)

The CRF needs to 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.

Please ensure that the CRF contains all four pages, and that the candidate name and number appear on all pages in the relevant spaces.

Notated Scores/Aural Guides/Programme Notes

All compositions are required to be supported by some form of documentation of the composer's intentions, whether that is an aural guide, a lead sheet or a notated score, or indeed a combination of these. Moreover, the mark scheme has a section devoted to this documentation, with a range of descriptors that goes from "Music is communicated fluently on paper with a comprehensive score or commanding aural guide" to "The written material in no way enhances the composition and is likely to be poor in its detail and layout".

Notated Scores

The level of score editing, where this was the chosen means of communicating music on paper, remains a concern in weaker submissions, but is also surprisingly lacking in some work that is otherwise of very high quality. Rhythmic notation seems to be in particular decline, but also spelling of accidentals that shows no awareness of harmonic surroundings. Elements such as dynamics, phrasing, slurs and articulation not only enhance the look of the score, they are integral elements of composition itself and, at advanced level, their consistent use is expected for higher marks.

A printed full score is not always the most appropriate submission for the work and, where students are working in a sequencer, it's worth pointing out that the process of turning the sequencer data into a highly polished full score is time consuming and complex.

Issues in printed scores coming from sequencers that persist from previous series include:

- Overly complex rhythmic notation arising from unquantized MIDI data
- Incorrect spelling of accidentals
- Incorrect or absent key signatures
- Incorrectly labelled or unlabelled sound sources, and labels (such as "So Cal", "Root Grinder" or "Cherry Wave") that give no clue as to the type of instrument or source used – such labels can easily be explained in the programme note or aural guide
- Inappropriate clef choices, or sticking with a given clef where changing partway through might be more prudent. Many examples were found of excessive ledger lines in both directions in some parts

- Music notated in the wrong octave (as a result of other MIDI transpositions or transformations not transferring accurately to the score)
- Audio parts that had been recorded into the software not being notated at all, including vocal parts, important rhythm guitar lines and instrumental solos
- Poor underlay of text in vocal lines.

Aural Guides

The best aural guides take stock of key compositional decisions and clarify intentions, with a clear structure outlined through **timings on the track (eg mm:ss)**. A large number of students are still giving bar numbers, and these are incredibly difficult to follow.

Some other guidance that may be helpful for students:

- A screenshot overview of the timeline taken from the software can be useful, but it needs to be of a size and enough detail to see the chosen timbre names and whether the material is audio or MIDI. It may therefore need to be over multiple pages.
- 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 absolutely fine 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. Conversely, an entire page showing the convolution reverb settings for a mocked up orchestral piece is not the best use of space and tells the examiner very little.
- Formatting of aural guides should focus on function over presentation. Illustrated title pages, overly large headings and guides that run to many pages without much text are all unnecessary.

Programme Notes

It has been stated before but bears repeating that a programme note, whether for a brief composition of a free composition, should be **150 words in total**. All that is required is to state and clarify intentions and to explain anything that might not be immediately obvious from the supporting documentation and recording, such as any software used (this can also be declared on the CRF). Lyrics for songs/choral pieces etc are useful and can be included alongside the programme note: indeed, examiners find referring to these very useful. However, detailed analyses of the student's own work, however scholarly, are not required and tend increasingly to outstay their welcome the further beyond 150 words they go.

Space in the programme note can be saved by indicating within the score or aural guide how and where given stimulus material (eg the riffs in brief 5 or the rhythms of brief 7) are used in the final composition. This also makes intentions very clear and helps examiners enormously.

Recordings

The quality of recording continues to improve, whether it is the willingness of students to supply live vocals, an improvement in the quality of sampler instruments or sound sources, or greater care with producing the finished audio. Examiners are always pleased to hear live performances of music for the forces written, though this does not confer an advantage in terms of marks and a software realisation is

always acceptable. Where a live realisation has fallen short of the score significantly, centres may wish to submit both the live recording and one taken from software.

One thing that was noticed this year was that some recordings had been produced but not listened to after exporting. Examiners heard the following features which should be avoided wherever possible:

- Metronomes left on during recording (a particular feature of GarageBand)
- Notes “sticking” (MIDI note off commands missing due to hanging ties or some other error)
- Poor balance between parts
- Parts not sounding within the arrangement due to being muted before export, or an isolated line being heard because it had been ‘soloed’ prior to bouncing the recording
- Recordings ending before the end of the composition or, in one case, five minutes after the end
- Long pauses in between the start of the recording and the beginning of the piece, often typified by footsteps receding from the device, notes being given at a piano or other preparatory time. It is ideal if these can be edited out prior to submission.

It is also fair to say that, especially in some genres, there are things that are found in scores that do not relate to what is heard and vice versa. It is important that the gap between score and recording is narrowed as much as possible. In most cases where there is a discrepancy, the given supporting material (score or aural guide) is the deciding factor. It is also important that the role of performers in the final performance where elements of improvisation or comping are provided, that *aren't* accounted for in the supporting material, **cannot** be counted as the student’s work.

Finally, please note that it is **not** necessary to record announcements at the start of each recording. The guidance from AQA about labelling each recording for this unit should be ample to identify the student and the relevant work. Labelling the compositions “Brief” and “Free” somewhere within the file name is most useful.

Final Thoughts

Students and centres alike should be congratulated on the immense amount of work that has gone into producing the final submissions for this unit. Their boundless creativity and wide diversity makes the process of assessing and moderating the work incredibly interesting and is an optimistic sign for the future of composition.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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