



Questions matter



GCSE

Music

8271/C NEA: Composing Music

Report on the Examination

8271

June 2024

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Context

This year was the first series in which centres were required to upload their GCSE Music NEA coursework samples digitally on Centre Services. Centres were very responsive to this new requirement and most did not have any issue with the new portal. Despite some occasional labelling and location problems, nearly all problems were dealt with promptly when centres were contacted. The impact of RAAC at the beginning of Year 11 affected a small number of centres. As a result, students were unable to access specialist places and music rooms or use key resources such as computers or performing equipment. Where this disruption affected students' learning, a coursework extension was provided by AQA.

Moderators reported the overall standard of composition had returned to pre-pandemic years. This was encouraging bearing in mind there had been a slight fall in standard during Covid. In this context, there were many excellent compositions which is testament to the hard work, commitment and support given by music teachers and which is to be commended.

The requirements for June 2024

Students were required to submit **two** compositions, one based on a choice of four given briefs, and the other a free choice of their own. The two compositions had to have a combined minimum time of **three** minutes and demonstrate the selection and use of at least **four** types of musical elements, two elements each taken from two separate lists.

Compositions were of varying lengths and most met the minimum duration requirement. There were some examples of excellent work from a range of students. Some students worked specifically to the minimum duration (ie ninety seconds for each piece) and where this occurred there tended to be a lack of musical development.

Free and brief compositions

The four briefs were wide ranging and diverse this year, providing students with a good selection to focus upon, whatever their ability. Briefs 1 and 2 were the most popular choices.

The rhythm in brief 1 was used as a stimulus for 'a piece of music to accompany a film about a secret agent'. Once again, many compositions were inspired by film and television and specifically well-known characters, such as James Bond. The rhythm was often developed in its entirety, or as an ostinato, or placed at the start of the composition where it was not fully utilised. Only a few students selected a small part of the rhythm (ie the triplet, duplet or crotchets) to develop.

In brief 2 students were required to 'compose a piece of music suitable to accompany a House of Horrors attraction at a theme park'. A short film clip was provided as a visual stimulus and a very wide range of compositions were submitted to fulfil the brief. Although work varied in standard, there were some wonderful pieces *inspired* by films which students had seen, with explanations given in the Programme Notes. The film clip helped guide student intentions and it was clear students enjoyed being able to create their own narrative. Many successful compositions portrayed varying degrees of tension (and sometimes resolution) in different scenarios. A few submissions were soundscapes rather than compositions and these sometimes lacked any form of development to achieve marks in the higher bands.

The least popular choice was Brief 3 where the stimulus was based on a poem entitled ‘ “Hope” is the thing with feathers’. Students tended to reflect well on the leaver’s assembly intention, with some compositions creating heartfelt responses. It should be noted that a few compositions did not use the text, and the poem was used purely as an instrumental stimulus, which is perfectly acceptable.

Brief 4 required students to compose a piece of music for a performance at a festival called ‘My Street’. This brief demonstrated the widest range of genres and musical styles, and some of the most creative responses. It was evident that students had thought about the concept of 'my street', looking at this from a geographical, autobiographical, or even historic angle to produce very individual responses. The brief gave students the opportunity to compose dance music in a variety of different styles and some submissions were a delight to moderate.

It was encouraging to see that many centres encouraged students to compose the brief and free compositions in a wide range of styles. Although rare, there was evidence that some students in the same centre had followed a set pattern, such as using the same structure and key, or similar melodic shapes and/or phrases. It is vital that centres give students the option to compose music to every part of their submission, choosing an approach that works for them and including the purpose and style of the music.

Centres should be cautious of the **pre-recorded loops** found in music software as the use of such loops (or of any pre-existing musical material) is **not** permitted. Students should be encouraged to create their own loops if they are working in a style where this is the norm. It is very important that the aural guide / annotated score document is used by the student to demonstrate the tools and methods they used to create their own loops.

Coursework receiving the top mark 36/36 was achieved by students using a wide variety of instruments, styles, and genres, including, but not limited to:

- Fusion
- Jazz
- Popular Song
- Rock
- Piano Solo
- Jazz Quintet
- Saxophone Ensemble
- String Trio / Quartet / Orchestra
- Brass Band
- Vocal Trio
- Orchestral

Musical features for students to consider further

The successful use of some musical elements was partly influenced by the choice of brief. For example, students tended to focus on the rhythm stimulus of brief 1 well and choose suitable timbres for brief 2. The most frequent errors related to harmonic incoherence, which was not always understood, particularly when it came to the use of dissonance which could be uncontrolled and used only for effect. Occasionally students found some difficulty with composing an effective melody to a chord sequence, creating mismanaged dissonances.

The following are musical features that some students need to demonstrate a more confident understanding of, within the context of the compositions they chose to write this summer:

- Melodic and rhythmic development
- Melodic shape, structure and design
- Use of a clear structure
- Rhythmic devices
- Harmonic progressions and their suitability to support a melodic line
- Use of cadences
- Tonality and modulation
- Instrumental pitch range

The Candidate Record Form

For each composition, students add the following details to the Candidate Record Form:

- Specify a **suggested audience or occasion**
- Select at least **four** types of musical element
- Describe any help given while writing the composition
- Write a **150-word Programme Note** to explain the intention, to describe how the composition was created and with which software or hardware, and to give more detail about the chosen musical features

Some students did not specify a suggested audience or occasion for their free composition and vague responses were given which were unhelpful, such as ‘to be performed to people aged 15-60’. These types of response are unclear and should be avoided as they are not easy to assess whether the music is appropriate for its intended purpose.

Where compositions are not performed by the student an explanation of how the music has been performed is required. This is easy to assess when a score is submitted, but in other situations where a score has not been provided, a description must be given outlining how the student conveyed to the performer how the part should be played. This information is important as it confirms to the moderator what the student’s input has been.

The Programme Note

This section of the Candidate Record Form informs the moderator of the compositional intention, including the intended audience/occasion. Students must also identify the types of musical element selected and provide details of any software and hardware used in the compositional process. Whilst some responses were very detailed others were either too brief, consisting of only a few lines, or there was not a Programme Note at all. Accounts that give little detail as to how the initial ideas have been created and which do not refer to the selected musical elements, nor provide information of any software and hardware used, are unhelpful during moderation. In previous years it has been suggested that to gauge if a Programme Note is of an appropriate length, students could read out their writing to their teacher before submission. It should be noted that the ‘150 words’ should be used only as a guide.

In addition to the Candidate Record Form, and to demonstrate the level of their musical understanding, students must also submit:

- An audio recording, to demonstrate how the music should sound when performed or played using technology
- A score, to present their musical intentions in detail

Audio Recordings

Some excellent recordings were submitted this year, including some ‘live’ performances, and centres should be commended on the quality of the work provided. The timings of each composition should be calculated carefully so that any silence remaining at the end of the recording is not included in the total duration of the student’s coursework. Some centres included announcements at the start of each composition, although this is **not** necessary as each recording is carefully labelled.

The Score

The Candidate Record Form, audio recording and Programme Note of the composition must be accompanied by at least one of the following documents:

- A staff notated score
- A lead sheet
- An aural guide

Students select the most appropriate method to demonstrate their intentions. Although the notated score remains a popular option, there was a large increase in the number of aural guides submitted this year. There were some excellent examples of annotated notes, the best including the following information:

- Clearly labelled screenshots, including instrumental names
- A screenshot of the whole composition from the DAW outlining the overall structure (usually the first page)
- Additional screenshots of parts, including annotated notes written around the edge of the images to demonstrate specific features found in the music
- Presentations in the form of a ‘log’ with timings that could be easily followed when listening to the composition

Some screenshots included boxes and arrows which, although helpful, were sometimes haphazardly annotated and were not always easy to follow logically. Presentation is an important part of the aural guide and it should be noted that it is unhelpful if instrumental names are cut off, instrumental parts are omitted or if the score is too small and difficult to read.

Understanding assessment

Moderators reported the accuracy of centre marking was mixed this year. Just over half of centres were marked within tolerance of the AQA standard, while the remaining centres were marked either too harshly or too leniently.

There was evidence the marking bands were not always clearly understood, particularly in the 18-16 band. Music in this band must have consistently excellent technical and expressive control throughout and should demonstrate a sophisticated level of understanding. Moderators frequently found marks had been awarded in this top band where some parts of the music were either undeveloped, simplistic or even incoherent.

In early 2023, AQA published the [moderation guidance](#) to provide further support for teachers and students. It covers a wide range of topics, including the process of marking, understanding the mark bands, what to look out for when marking coursework and what happens to the coursework when the samples are sent to the moderators in May each year.

If teachers require support or have any questions about composition they should contact their *NEA Advisor*. Teachers should look out for the Curriculum Connect online meetings, which are free to attend. The next Curriculum Connect meeting will be on Wednesday 24th September 4-5pm. To provide further support around the assessment of work, the *Teacher Online Standardisation (TOLS)* materials are available in the Centre Services area of the AQA website, including examples of a range of styles of composition that have achieved the top mark.

Teacher comments

Teacher comments added to the Candidate Record Form about their students' compositions are a very important part of moderation as they justify the marks awarded by the centre and provide good reasons and evidence for their justification.

This year teacher comments were variable. It was a pleasure for moderators to read some excellent and insightful comments where the compositions had been accurately marked, but weaker examples gave very limited comments and quoted the assessment criteria without explanation. There were some submissions from centres where nothing at all was written about the compositions. In some instances the terminology from one band of the assessment criteria was used whilst marks from another band were awarded. Furthermore, marks should never be based on the wider circumstances of the student.

The following is a list of useful tips to aid teachers with writing assessment comments:

- Use statements from the Assessment Criteria (such as 'highly creative' or 'secure creativity') and link these with supporting evidence from the composition
- Always provide some examples from the composition to justify your mark
- Ensure your evidence matches the mark band and the assessment statement within the band
- Do not include details about the students' musical abilities as these provide nothing about the composition itself

Administration

Uploading NEA coursework to the AQA digital portal was successfully managed by many centres and most preferred this new method. Where there were problems, such as inaccurate labelling of students' work and incorrect placement of documentation on the portal, these were overcome and most centres were very quick to respond.

Centres should be aware that **five** documents must be uploaded under *View Files* on the portal:

1. The Candidate Record Form
2. Brief score
3. Brief recording
4. Free score
5. Free recording

Any further files such as the *Performance Duration Declaration Form* must be uploaded under *Centre Documentation*.

The following is a list of issues which affected moderation:

- Files were inaccurately labelled. All labelling should be completed in the format described in the AQA digital guidance documentation
- Missing audio files, scores or Candidate Record Forms and/or Performance Duration Declaration Form. The latter form (called PDDF) should only be completed when the minimum duration requirement of three minutes had not been met by one or more of their students
- Candidate Record Forms were unsigned by the teacher and/or the student. Please note that this may be completed digitally
- Scores attached to the end of the Candidate Record Form, rather than being uploaded as separate files
- Marks entered on the centre marks submission were different to those written on the Candidate Record Form
- Samples uploaded after the AQA deadline which caused significant delays to moderation

Centres should ensure that all documentation is **checked carefully** before their submission is uploaded as any problems can cause unnecessary delay to the moderation process.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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