



GCSE
Music

8271/W Component 1 Understanding Music

Report on the Examination

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General comments

This component is worth 40% of GCSE marks (96 marks), with the content 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 Mozart Clarinet Concerto in A major, K. 622, 3rd movement, Rondo **is compulsory**.

Then, students choose to answer **one** of the three remaining questions on either:

Little Shop of Horrors 1982 off-Broadway version – the following three tracks:

- *Prologue/Little Shop of Horrors (overture)*
- *Mushnik and Son*
- *Feed Me*

Paul Simon Graceland album – the following three tracks:

- *Graceland*
- *Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes*
- *You Can Call Me Al*

Zoltán Kodály: *Battle and Defeat of Napoleon* and *Intermezzo* from *Háry János*.
(Orchestral version with cimbalon and without vocal parts.)

Each question has four parts, the first three requiring short answers (2 marks) and the final question requiring an extended response (8 marks).

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.

Section A: Questions 01 – 08

This section had questions assessing the recognition of:

articulation, dynamics, harmony, intervals, melody, playing techniques, rhythm, sonority (timbre), structure, tempo, texture, time signatures, tonality, and types of chords.

Each question was linked directly to a musical excerpt. There was one question involving staff notation:

- 05.1 where students were required to fill in five missing notes to a given rhythm.

Other question types included short answer questions, multiple choice question and ‘features’ questions.

It is worth noting that in the Section A short answer ‘features’ questions, students can gain credit by answering correctly across all the elements, some of the elements, or even only one element.

For example, in 02.3

- Identify two features of **effects, melody** and/or **tempo** used in this excerpt typical of Rock music of the 1960s and 1970s.

students could provide three effects responses (or melody, or tempo), or two effects and one from melody or tempo responses, or two from melody and one from tempo responses, or one from each element.

Students and teachers are reminded that the phrase ‘*used in this excerpt*’ is paramount, as this means that some generic features might not necessarily always apply.

Question 01

The first two excerpts on the paper were from Area of study 1 (AoS1). Excerpt A was *taken from Israel in Egypt* by Handel and Excerpt B was *part of Dies irae* from Saint-Saen’s *Requiem*.

Most students were able to identify the correct voice (soprano) and around half could correctly identify the 3/4 time signature.

However, the question on naming the interval was not well answered, although there has been an improvement in responses, with most students answering with a number eg 3 or 4, and few ‘qualification’ detail of the interval, such as ‘perfect’ 5th. Examiners did report however, an increase in students answering with a time frame answer eg ‘1 second’ or 2 seconds, which indicates that this type of question may not have been encountered before, despite its frequent appearance in GCSE Music papers.

Only around half of students were able to correctly identify the (church/pipe) organ correctly for 01.5.

Question 02

Question 02 featured *Kasmir* by Led Zeppelin and Pinar Toprak's *Waking Up* from Captain Marvel. Less than half of students were able to spot the harmonic device in 02.1, but the 02.3 features question was well answered, with some especially good answers on the effects used in the excerpt.

The *Captain Mavel* interval question provided very challenging for students, but more than half were able to correctly identify both the playing technique and the tempo. Student knowledge about appropriate articulation vocabulary remains weak.

Question 03

Question 3 saw music from the traditional music area of study (AoS 3). Excerpt A was Hallu Mergia & The Walia's *Tche Belew* and Excerpt B was Camilo's *Vida de Rico*.

Both excerpts were well-answered overall, with only some vague and inconsistent harmonic vocabulary in question 03.5 reported by some examiners.

Question 04

Question 4 focussed on music of the Western classical tradition since 1910 (AoS 4), beginning with an excerpt from Arnold's *English Dances, Set 2*.

The first two questions (04.1 and 04.2) proved accessible for many students, although a significant number of (incorrect) *clarinet* responses were seen. The multiple-choice interval question from notation saw few correct answers identifying the falling (perfect) 5th.

Excerpt B was the taken from Copland's *Three Latin American Sketches – No. 3 Danza de Jalisco*.

The sonority (timbre) percussion question was well-answered here, and also a pleasing number of students were able to spot the changing metres, and also identify the textures being used. However, the articulation element was mainly avoided.

Question 05

Excerpt A of Question 06 included the dictation question, which was focussed on an excerpt taken from a Chopin *Nocturne*.

The melody ascended in step by five notes, finishing on the same note which followed thereafter. There was a large disparity in outcome here, with approximately a third of students achieving either full marks or zero for this question. However, most achieved at least one mark.

Excerpt B turned to Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8*

Around half of students were able to correctly identify the time signature, and the dynamics response was well-answered in 05.3.

Question 06

Question 06 featured Wolf Alice's *The Last Man on Earth* and Bernstein's *America* from *Westside Story*.

This question was mostly well-answered, with a pleasing number of students spotting the imperfect cadence in 06.4. However, the first question on 'note of the scale' was poorly answered by students.

Question 07

Traditional music was the focus for Question 7, and the excerpts were *What's the Matter with the Mill* by Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe and *Ninebarrow's 'Hey John Barleycorn'*.

This excerpt was well answered, with the majority of students gaining at least one mark for identifying the guitar playing techniques.

In Excerpt B, just over a third of students were able to correctly identify the structure of the excerpt as in the opening multiple-choice question 07.4, but most students scored well on the sonority(timbre) and texture elements in the 07.6 features question.

Question 08

The final question in Section A included two more excerpts from AoS4, featuring Steve Reich's *Fast* from *2x5* and Kodály's *Dances of Galanta*.

The questions on harmony and tempo proved problematic for many students here, with nearly two-thirds of responses incorrect for each question.

Excerpt B was reasonably well answered, but the interval question (08.5) and rhythm and sonority (timbre) responses were often incorrect. Despite this, the texture question of 08.4 was well-answered.

Section B: Questions 09 - 12

Questions in this section are based on the study pieces named in the specification. No audio excerpts are played, and no scores are allowed into the examination room. There is no requirement for students to make any reference to bar numbers in responses, but where they do examiners do check the location points given for accuracy.

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 the optional study works the two most popular choices continue to be *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Paul Simons' Graceland*.

Centres are reminded of the marking guidance for the eight-mark questions found in the mark scheme:

- 7-8 marks** A comprehensive response which is consistently coherent and logically structured.
- 5-6 marks** A wide-ranging response which is mostly coherent and well structured.
- 3-4 marks** A relevant response despite some inaccuracy/omission and weaknesses in terms of coherency and structure
- 1-2 marks** A limited response with some significant inaccuracy/omission and a lack of clarity.

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

Unfortunately, a significant number of responses failed to focus on the key words in the question. Whilst credit was given for valid points made, a noticeable number of students seemed to write a lot for unfortunately very little credit. Additionally, there is no need for any introduction or summary to be included, and examiners did report an increase in bullet points answers, although many bullet points were unexplained, with some ‘scattergun’ listing of vocabulary.

Centres are also reminded that students only have 30 minutes to complete the questions in Section B. This means that they have 15 minutes to spend on each Study piece (the compulsory Mozart and then one other optional piece). Time management is of the essence.

Question 09

This was based on Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto in A major in D major, K.622 for AoS 1.

09.1 asked for two ways in which the violins were used in the first ‘tutti section’ of the rondo theme. There were many answers available here, with ‘melody’, ‘accompaniment’ ‘loud’, ‘soft and ‘arco/bowed’ the most popular answers.

09.2 asked for two keys (excluding A major) used in the first episode, with most students achieving at least one mark.

09.3 focussed on two chromatic chords used in the movement. There was a range of augmented 6th types of chord, a diminished 7th, and also a dominant 7th with a flattened 9th available as correct responses. Students found this specific question very problematic however, despite the fact that Mozart had used these chords in the movement, with few correct answers reported.

The eight-mark question involved Mozart’s use of **dynamics**, **harmony** and/or **sonority (timbre)** being typical of the Classical period during which it was written.

Answers here ranged from the comprehensive and highly organised, to the ‘scattergun’ approach. Students in the main were able to comment on a couple of elements, most commonly dynamics and instruments, with the bulk of answers being in the limited or relevant bands (marks 1-4).

Some students continue to write about everything they know, regardless of the elements asked about. Students are reminded to write about **only** the elements which are listed in the question and **explain** how the elements are used.

Question 10

Question 10 focussed on the three songs by *Menken* from *Little Shop of Horrors* 1982 off-Broadway version, beginning with asking about two features of the organ melody.

Question 10.1 was well answered, with frequent correct responses involving calypso/tressilo/332 and syncopated rhythms.

Question 10.2 asked students about two melodic features of klezmer music found in *Mushnik and Son*. Unfortunately, this was poorly answered by students.

Question 10.3 attracted a wide range and variety of mostly correct answers, although some vagueness of response using musical vocabulary was apparent.

The eight-mark question asked about how **harmony, melody, and/or sonority (timbre)** were used to create a sense of drama in *Prologue/Little Shop of Horrors* (overture). The final line of the question stated that students '*should refer to the opening Prologue only*'.

Unfortunately, some students decided to write about both parts of the overture, which meant that some of their observations were not creditable. The 'God-like narrator voices, 'drum roll', 'organ', 'sequence' and chord progression details were frequently mentioned in the stronger answers. However, very little work in the wider -ranging and comprehensive bands was seen. Students are reminded to write about **only** the elements which are listed in the question.

Question 11

This section focussed on the three songs by Paul Simon specified as the study piece for AoS 3.

11.1 required students to identify two harmonic features of the introduction of *Graceland*. This was well answered overall, with a lot of students pinpointing the 'primary chords', '(tonic) pedal' and the 'perfect cadence' to score well on the question.

11.2 was a straightforward question asking about two instruments used in the horn section of *Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes*. This was well-answered by most students.

11.3 asked about two ways in which a line of lyrics was made to stand out in *Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes*. 'Repeated' and 'louder' were the most commonly correct answers, in a well-answered question.

Question 11.4 asked students to explain how Paul Simon created an original song through **melody, rhythm, and/or sonority (timbre)** in the song *You Can Call Me Al*.

Overall, this was quite well-answered, with most students picking up marks on the rhythmic and sonority (timbre) elements. There was good description of the (palindromic) bass solo, and rhythmic features demonstrated. Students are reminded to write about **only** the elements which are listed in the question.

Question 12

Question 12 was based on Kodály's two study pieces specified from *Háry János*. However, whilst this was the least popular optional study piece chosen, answers were noticeably stronger and more detailed.

For the Summer 2024 paper, the three shorter questions in Section B were based upon the *Intermezzo*.

12.1 asked students to name two rhythmic features. This was a straight-forward question and most students scored well here, with frequent correct mention of 'repetitive rhythms' and 'scotch snap'.

12.2 focussed on the two different keys used. Again, this was strongly answered.

The 12.3 question asked about two ornaments used in the horn solo. This was well-answered, with most students scoring at least one mark.

The final question, 12.4, moved the focus to *The Battle and Defeat of Napoleon* and asked for an explanation of how Kodály uses **melody, rhythm, and/or sonority (timbre)** to create music with a military style.

This was well-answered overall, with some very perceptive responses covering most/all of the elements asked about in the question. Rhythmic patterns were often very well explained, and at the top of the Level 4 marking band some students were even able to describe the musical effect used by Kodály on the listener in a coherent manner. Despite some students confusing the instrumentation of both pieces, there were noticeably more responses at least in the wider ranging Level 3 band. Students are reminded to write about **only** the elements which are listed in the question.

Final comments

The most common and less well-answered questions/oversights concerned:

- articulation, harmony and interval misunderstanding/omission/weakness
- lack of secure Italian tempo word vocabulary
- responses which showed a lack of understanding/vocabulary of the specific musical element being asked about.
- the continued variable quality of correct responses involving musical notation, namely the dictation question 05.1
- only writing about the elements which are asked about in the extended eight-mark questions.

- explaining how the musical elements are used, rather than just listing some (known) vocabulary in the extended eight-mark questions.
- producing a clear, coherent structure in the in the extended eight-mark questions rather than adopting a scatter-gun bullet point approach.

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 some evidence of close study during the course, with some perceptive and comprehensive responses to the questions based on the compulsory and optional 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.